On Queens and Monsters: Science Fiction and the Black Political Imagination

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Publication Date
2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
On Queens and Monsters: Science Fiction and the Black Political Imagination

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Jalondra Alicia Davis

September 2017

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my committee chair, Jayna Brown for your time, support, and careful readings of my writing for these past four years. I would like to thank past and current committee members Jodi Kim, Eric Edwards, Dylan Rodriguez and Ashon Crawley for your thoughtful comments and questions as I made my way through this project. Thank you to the ETST comrades who so generously gave your food, showers, and couches during my years of commuting. Great thanks to all of the faculty, students, and staff at California State University, Dominguez Hills and University of California, Riverside who have offered me your brilliance, humor, advice, and friendship. Special thanks also to off-campus mentors and my Black Women Write group members, who each held me up through this more times than you know. Thank you to my family, who supported me, believed in me, and helped make my doctorate possible even when you didn’t quite understand my work. Within my family I include my dearest friends—you know who you are. A special thanks to my little sister Tiffany Aliyah, who cared for my child like he was your own so often over the past two years. And most of all, thank you to my son Shiloh Akin. I didn’t know before I started that I was doing this for you. You are the love of my life and my greatest inspiration. A special thanks to the University of California, Riverside, Ford Fellowship Foundation, and California State University Chancellor’s Office for their financial support for this research.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

On Queens and Monsters: Science Fiction and the Black Political Imagination

by

Jalondra Alicia Davis

Doctorate of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Riverside, September 2017
Dr. Jayna Brown, Chairperson

“On Queens and Monsters: Science Fiction and the Black Political Imagination” explores how black science fiction, both within and outside of inclusion within the American institution of SF, illustrates and contests the boundaries of black political discourse. Intersecting the fields of African American literary studies, cultural studies, SF studies, black feminist, and black queer theory, I highlight the congruence between dominant readings of Afrofuturism (as a site through which to escape racial alterity) and black political discourses that frame the ‘restoration’ of patriarchy and sexual normativity as preconditions for black community progress. I consider, rather, the political productiveness of ‘uneasiness,’ the discomfort produced by narratives that cannot easily be framed as liberating. Such narratives, found in the works of Pauline Hopkins, Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, and Nicole Sconiers complicate the meanings of resistance and challenge the normative gender, sexual, and familial arrangements to which black politics often ascribe.
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INTRODUCTION

My project looks at black politics in Black women’s science fiction.¹ I apply an expanded definition of politics that focuses not on voting behavior and policy but the ways in which politics are shaped and practiced in black culture, everyday spaces, and popular media.² I focus upon gender and sexuality, looking at how constructions of black womanhood within black political discourse and cultural production function to galvanize a black political conservatism that doesn’t see itself as such. What I mean here, is that narratives around black femininity are particularly productive in buttressing a black political stance able to—withing a discourse of black resistance—reify patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and individualist, behavior-based rather than affinity-based and structurally-aimed strategies for racial and social justice. In short, how do the slippery discourses around matriarchs, ladies, and queens [circulate] in ways that inhibit radical responses to social conditions—even as people see themselves as radically resisting? Continuing the important work done on the gendered disciplinary features of black political discourse in black feminist and queer studies criticism, this project also engages with Afrofuturism and science fiction studies. Afrofuturism studies frequently celebrate how black science fiction destabilizes the association of Black people with a fixed, realist racial past; challenge the relegation of Black people to a realm outside of science, technology, and the innovations of the future; and interrogate popular culture’s attachments to a narrow range of archetypal performances of black personhood.³

In their definition of Astro-Blackness as an extension of Afrofuturism, Anderson and Rollins claim, “Astro-Blackness is an Afrofuturistic concept in which a black
person’s state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe (Rollins 2015, 1). Furthermore, this notion of Astro-Blackness suggests a shift from the modern era or nation-state bound analog notion of blackness transitioning through a digitized era toward and in tension with post-digital perspectives as a global response to the planetary and near planetary challenges facing black life in the early twenty-first century.” The observation that Astro-Blackness represents a release from a “confining and crippling slave mentality” captures one recurring theme of Afrofuturism studies, a linear liberatory narrative that represents ‘outer space’ and the ‘future’ as new spaces of possibility that can liberate the confined slave subject of the modern era from a ‘slave mentality.’ While not arguing with the case that Afrofuturism opens up new possibilities, representations, and ways of engaging existing reality, I am wary of the reinforcement of an Ethiopianist narrative in which enslavement can only be read as a dark past from which to ‘rise’. Rather than a singular radical break with how slavery might have influenced and shaped us, that results in a shiny brand new, liberated, unpolluted black being freed to zoom into space and the future, I propose a critical, careful, un-judgmental grappling with that shaping, to see what can be gleaned as well as what should be left behind. The fictions that are often lumped in to these kinds of characterizations of Afrofuturism are themselves more skeptical, uneasy, and critical than such characterizations and expectations of the genre (if it can be called a singular genre) would suggest. I challenge some of the critical and popular investment in Afrofuturism as a site of progressive blackness, unmoored from the racial traumas of the past and present.
This investment threatens to overlook how often black science fiction is deeply concerned with the past and skeptical about a progressive narrative of liberation.

While I believe in and labor towards liberation in the sense of my commitment to improving the quality and longevity of black life, I find myself questioning the limitations of liberational discourse, particularly how it is embedded in Afrofuturism. To put this more plainly, I am less interested in uber-powerful black superheroes or black-led space operas than the narratives that leave us feeling more troubled, frustrated, uneasy. This uneasiness may hold political possibility—at least complementary to, at best greater than—that derived from the psychic satisfaction of seeing ourselves in more powerful depictions. The latter, while being psychically significant and politically useful in some instances, can also threaten to reinforce the very logics through which the violence against and subordination of black people are achieved.

Melissa Harris-Perry defines black common sense as, “the idea among African Americans that blackness is a meaningful political category...it is the implicit notion of “we-ness” that defines black common sense.” In *Bibles, Barbershops, and BET*, she uses the theory of everyday talk to examine how this we-ness plays out in the political discourses in spaces in which Black people perceive themselves to be among one another, the informal spaces which constitute a black counterpublic. Following Harris-Perry’s lead in identifying these alternate sites of political discourse and ideological development, I advance a notion of “living room politics.” I take this term from my own political experiences, in which the gathering of several adults of African descent into one person’s home for informal social events inevitably turns to discussions of pop cultural and
political events of concern to Black people, and to the question of how to improve the quality and longevity of Black people’s lives. I trouble Melissa Harris-Perry’s optimistic portrayal of the progressive impact of everyday talk on ideological development in individuals.

I am concerned with the patterns of these discourses, which often eschew and reject structural critiques, reproduce theories of urban pathology, make unfavorable comparisons to other ethnic groups that seem to be more successful in American society, and propose as solutions the need for Black people to stop complaining, to build black businesses and institutions, and to better order their sexual, family and home lives. In living room politics, the search for empowerment or betterment often turns to the home, not the diverse homes that Black people actually construct and navigate, but the home as a figurative site representative of well-ordered gender, sexuality, and family formation.

This highly contested space of the ‘home’ is imagined, in these political discourses, as a heteronormative, male-led union containing children. Of course this is not unique to black political discourse; it is the dominant form propagated by the white bourgeois nuclear family norm. But for Black people, this home is framed, not only as the proper order of things, but as a form of resistance to the disorganizing effects of slavery and white supremacist society. Success in managing this home, in getting Black people to somehow en-masse conform to an image of properly disciplined gender and sexual life, is imagined as the pathway to social progression, economic uplift, and political power. As the home is gendered as feminine, the control of women: their autonomy, their sexuality, their behavior, their childbearing, figures centrally. Narrative strategies involving Black
women consistently push black political inclinations towards a narrow vision of the home and, consequently, socially and economically conservative projects.

To talk about black politics is frequently synonymous with talking about black nationalism, so often is it identified as a centrally structuring principle in black political thought. Many studies of black nationalism have taken black nationalism to task for its investments in manhood, the family, and reproduction. The most critical of these works read black nationalism in the context of the broader, modern phenomena associated with the rise of the Western state, white nationalism in blackface. Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd argues that black nationalism interacts with conservative politics in ways that are detrimental and limiting to a truly progressive black politics able to address the heterogeneous identities and interests of African American people. Highlighting what she calls the black Cultural Pathology Paradigm (BCPP), Alexander-Floyd shows how in the 1990s the BCPP (the image of a sexually deviant black underclass as the inhibition to black progress) aligned white and black nationalists in policies which privileged the restoration of the black nuclear family at the expense of poverty amelioration and civil rights. However, James Lance Taylor points out that the critiques of nationalism which have highlighted its tendencies towards sexism, homophobia, and autocratic politics have underplayed the fact that these tendencies also appear in what might get called liberal integrationism, radicalism, and perhaps just black politics overall. Robin D. G. Kelley frequently calls attention to the great variety of nationalist projects, and the tendency of critics, in particular, to only evaluate black nationalism through the rhetoric and projects of a few key figures and organizations such as the West Coast Black Panther Party.
Frequently, critics of black nationalism have operated from different definitions of what black nationalism actually is. Is it an ideology, a theory, a belief, or a set of identifiable political practices? Can it really be distinguished as an entity of its own, distinguishable as a distinct philosophy within broader black political culture? After all, a number of important studies of contemporary black politics have drawn similar conclusions as those of Alexander-Floyd without foregrounding nationalism as a category in their analysis. Adolph Reed’s *Stirrings in the Jug* shows, with a thorough attention to political economy and institutional structures, how conceptions of blacks as politically undifferentiated has legitimated a complicity with the pro-growth policies that intensify the processes of deprivation and violence for those with less access to formal political structures. Both Cathy Cohen’s *AIDS and the Boundaries of Blackness: The Breakdown of Black Politics* and *Democracy Remixed* look at how the notion of “the black community” and the politics of respectability combine to mask material differences and further marginalize the most underrepresented and underserved segments of the black population. Taking a longer view of black politics, Erica Edwards traces the development and cohesion of the idea that black politics are best carried out under the direction of a charismatic, patriarchal figure, including in her analysis leaders in both liberal and nationalist traditions. So one wonders, what are we really talking about when we talk about black nationalism, does talking about black politics necessarily imply we are talking about black nationalism, and is there a way to be more precise?

Wahneema Lubiano’s work on nationalism offers a pathway between rigid definitions and more amorphous uses of nationalism, defining it as a “plural, flexible, and
“contested” orientation compatible with a number of philosophies and projects, a central outlook of African Americans regardless of political identification.\textsuperscript{11} I find this definition perhaps the most adept; by describing nationalism as an outlook rather than a rigid set of beliefs, she accounts for the application of “nationalist” to so many Black thinkers, activists and projects and explains how the features of nationalism are features of black political culture more broadly. However, I think that there are those nationalist projects that must be recognized as distinct forms, as they consciously frame themselves as countering the narratives of liberalism, reconciliation, and assimilation. I have decided to foreground the term black politics in my analysis, assuming that the first and broadest form of black nationalism, the sense of we-ness, is a prerequisite for the existence of anything that can be called black politics. I identify five often overlapping forms of black nationalism, but Black Power and cultural nationalisms are those most relevant to this project.\textsuperscript{12} While I concur with many scholars of black nationalism that it is a long political and intellectual tradition, I do identify the Black Power Movement as a particular site of resurgence, coherence, and visibility of black nationalism, with lasting impacts on contemporary black politics. The actual activities and actors within the Black Power Movement are incredibly diverse, but I argue that the most legible resonance of Black Power in popular black political discourse is a confrontational rhetorical posture that prioritizes manhood and self-reliance while demanding racial unity. Cultural nationalism emphasizes African culture and a cyclical worldview, and attempts to restore African identity and greatness primarily—though not exclusively—through psychological, artistic, and performative means.
Black women’s science fiction is the primary site of my project. I look at how certain tropes of science fiction: time travel, bodily transfiguration and invasion, utopia, and the alien encounter all work within black women’s science fiction to engage and critique not only the colonial logics that often undergird these tropes in mainstream science fiction but, primarily, the masculinism and heteronormativity of dominant trends in black political discourse. My work is in conversation and in tension with the project of Afrofuturism, an umbrella term for speculation, science fiction and technoculture of the African diaspora. Some of my impetus for collecting and analyzing [less explicit and more explicit] forms of science fiction together is informed by Afrofuturism’s claiming of a wide range of speculative and scientific culture in order to refute the idea that Black people are less likely to engage in fantasy, science, or the possibilities offered by the future and other realms. However, I depart from the impulse within the critical and popular discussion of Afrofuturism to gather widely variant types of cultural production into a specific aesthetic lineage, and from the investment in Afrofuturism as a progressive project offering opportunities for agency beyond the bonding of Black people to the traumatic racial past and present. I am interested in speculative cultures not as a corrective to ‘raceless’ and imperialist futures and exclusionary discourses around science but as their own site and repository for narratives that are troubling as well as liberating. I insist that speculative cultures register contemporary black politics as firmly as other forms of black literature and culture.

Black women’s science fiction has still received little sustained attention from a perspective that recognizes its genealogies both in science fiction genres and in a
tradition in Black women’s writing that often critiques the heteronormative and disciplinary imperatives of black politics. One work useful in this respect is Sherryl Vint’s analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, which explores how speculation within neo-slave narratives can allow for possibilities beyond the limitations of realism. According to Vint, Butler used time travel in *Kindred* in order to interrogate contemporary postures towards the slave past and the question of acquiescence. In my own project I argue that this posture is a highly gendered one that also shows up in contemporary political discourse. Though there are many single-text, article-length studies of science fiction by Black women authors, they rarely take on the literature from the perspective I am proposing, and there are few book-length projects. Monica A. Coleman’s *Making A Way Out of No Way* devotes considerable space to Black women’s science fiction, but looks at it in a theological context, examining how characters’ practices of spirituality and community-building form a model for a postmodern womanist theology. Marleen S. Barr’s *Afrofuture Females*, published within the burgeoning excitement over Afrofuturism, begins to recognize Black women’s science fiction as a vital contribution to science fiction’s broadening horizons. But this is still largely an early and exploratory volume focused on discovering, compiling, and remarking upon the existence of black speculative fiction rather than advancing rigorous critical analysis.

Esther Jones’ *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women’s Science Fiction* and Ingrid Thaler’s *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions* are, to date, the only single-authored monographs advancing sustained criticism of Black women’s science fiction. Jones
explores the capacity of science fiction to interrogate the violence with which science and medicine have historically treated Black women’s bodies, made painfully obvious through the treatment of women such as Sara Baartman and Henrietta Lacks, and the contemporary reifications of race through biopolitics and genetics. Reading authors such as Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nalo Hopkinson, she reveals how each author resists the dominant mythologies constructed about Black women through medicine and constructs womanist alternatives for knowledge production, healing, and survival. She offers black speculative fiction as a complement to narrative medicine’s attempts to humanize bodies that medicine often pathologizes and exploits.

Heavily indebted to Paul Gilroy, Ingrid Thaler’s *Black Atlantic Speculative Fiction* utilizes the construct of the Black Atlantic to analyze the exchanges between and interdependent production of ‘white’ and ‘black’ tropes in African diasporic speculative fiction. She readsOctavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*, Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* to demonstrate that black literature is produced by white and black literary forbears and exchanges in white and black coded tropes that must be read in conversation with one another. Thaler’s intervention into the racialization of literary genealogies is echoed in my own concern with some Afrofuturism studies’ attempt to gather disparate produces of black speculative culture into a single genealogy. Her focus on the mutually constituting tropes of white and black culture does remind me to be somewhat self-critical about my focus on intraracial black politics; the discourses that I analyze also circulate in broader U.S. discursive culture. However, like Thaler, I believe the historical and cultural specificities
of blackness cause even similar discourses to have very particular forms, that have particular origins, stakes, and reasons for their perpetuation. I don’t wish to claim that black intraracial politics occur apart from the interracial, but I wish to foreground and prioritize what people who recognize themselves as black say to one another and themselves about black life.

I also depart from Thaler in a reading practice that resists the use of allegory or metaphor to read science/speculative fiction. I think that to read science fiction primarily as allegory or metaphor for ‘real’ life does violence to the world-building process that may be informed by concerns about the real world, that may involve some extrapolation, but that, importantly, surpasses the boundaries of material reality to imagine disruptively new arrangements, relationships, societies, that should not be collapsed to a one-to-one relationship with reality. I am particularly thinking of the work Butler does in the Xenogenesis series, and the major critical mistake I think some make in aligning the Oankali with slaveholders or colonizing whites. Estrangement is an important part of the reading practice and effect of science fiction that many who work on this literature from within black studies fail to consider thoroughly. The estrangement of science fiction, hopefully (here I borrow from Tom Moylan’s arguments for science fiction’s political potential) trains the eye to see the real world differently, not necessarily to make direct comparisons between the vaguely and disturbingly familiar constructed world but to make the ‘real’ world strange as well, to denaturalize and defamiliarize its unjust arrangements.¹⁸ Science/speculative fiction is a compelling site for looking at black politics precisely because warnings of ‘pragmatism’ ‘limits’ and ‘reality’ are so often
used to suppress radical visioning and action. I read science fiction texts not so much as metaphors, but as signifying texts that hint, trouble, and comment on what we think of as reality, that play with discourses that might then be processed and reconsidered in the context of black politics.

I advance my analysis through black feminism, particularly informed by black feminist and black queer political science, history, and cultural criticism that problematize representational politics and respectability. In terms of the treatment of politics I turn to scholars such as Hazel Carby, Cathy Cohen, Candice Jenkins, Roderick Ferguson, and Victoria Wolcott, who all uncover the patterns of discipline and violence embedded into the politics of respectability, which has become shorthand for a myriad of discursive, performance, and political practices that presume to ‘shield’ Black folks from accusations of deviance and control expressions of excess. I see this work as often providing for and in conversation with a growing alternative approach to black feminist—intersecting with queer-of-color—theory and cultural criticism, an approach that departs from identifying and refuting ‘controlling images’ to analyzing the means by which such images come to occupy the space of abjection; from seeking wholeness, completion, victory and simplistic readings of resistance to exploring the possibilities that might be offered by liminality, uncertainty, apparent subjection, and performances read as embarrassing or shameful by dominant black political culture. I build here upon Jennifer Nash, who identifies black feminism’s dominant theory of representation as a process of reclaiming, recovering, and restoring black female bodies from a violent visual culture. Nash’s own study of racialized pornography and the works of scholars such as
LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Mireille Miller-Young, Uri McMillan, Dareik Scott, and others are exemplary of a growing contemporary approach: the intersection of sexuality, cultural, and gender studies in projects that challenge, rather than seek inclusion within the normative; that turn to sites and practices often condemned by both black political culture and black feminist analysis as potentially productive. This contemporary approach is not entirely new; but earlier strains of queer theory, pleasure studies, and non-injury-based readings of the erotic in black feminist genealogy have tended to be minimized against the overpowering narrative of contemporary black feminism as a direct intellectual descendant of the mostly middle class Black women’s club movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 

Many scholars within this contemporary approach prioritize a process that I call *unruly reading*. Unruly reading departs from a tradition in black studies that tends to place black cultural production in the context of what it can do for black ‘liberation’ in the world, explicitly. The work of unruly reading derives from political concerns but these concerns are more implicit within the readings, which are open to the often conflicting and fraught possibilities of what culture can produce. I believe this is an important and necessary practice for black studies, and that black cultural production itself is not always bound to a linear relationship between artmaking and resistance, neither should its criticism be. Complex approaches are needed to read the often complicated and contradictory impulses of culture (particularly the popular literature and culture on which I like to focus), and perhaps as critics we do a disservice to black cultural work by pressuring it to perform the labor of healing, recovery, and/or liberation that it is not intended to, equipped for, or
even desirous of performing. Terrion Williamson encapsulates here some of what I am trying to get at in terms of the work of unruly reading, “It is about the refinement of the question and deliberation in ways that do not always lead to neat conclusions or demonstrable solutions.”

However, I am ultimately interested in bridging the more overt political concerns of traditional black feminist work with the deliberative, often open-ended practices of unruly reading. More pointedly, I wonder how the things that we might assume are liberating be confining and the things that scare or trouble us do the work of liberation. In this I do not assume or propose that any of these things are only capable of one of these functions. But I want to trouble what is taken for granted as positive, empowering, redemptive. I propose that fresh, less reverent readings of black culture can have a destabilizing effect on the kinds of dominant disciplinary discourses and representational strategies that often shepherd black politics away from their more radical potential. I put black feminist and queer political science, literary, and cultural criticism in conversation with critical theories of bare life, posthumanism, and the grotesque to call into the question the normative categories: heroism, humanity, beauty, to which black politics still aspire. In doing this, I find myself still desiring and needing to talk about Black women’s representation, which so often undergirds black political projects that urge conformity to normative categories. But I do so with a cautiousness of the “dichotomous regulatory regimes that structure so much of representational discourse.” While I am absolutely indebted to black feminist critical practices that have for generations now identified, defined, and analyzed recurring archetypes, I am also concerned about how such
practices threaten to reify archetypes by limiting the characters and performers that they identify to those frameworks. More particularly, I think that ‘archetype hunting,’ as Williamson refers to it, focuses on intraracial perceptions rather than my primary interest: the labor that such archetypes perform within black political culture. Rather than singular figures, I analyze the general contours and uses of overlapping discourses around black femininity, not in order to refute or improve upon them, but to examine their current functions and potential possibilities. In the interest of disrupting good-bad dichotomies, I look not only at the similar functions of matriarchy discourse (which, as I explain in my second chapter, umbrellas a number of archetypes), and the seemingly positive discourses of ladyhood and queenhood.

My first chapter analyzes the intersection of Ethiopianism, queenhood, and patriarchal protection in the utopian fiction of Pauline Hopkins and Tananarive Due. Though separated by author, genre, and nearly a century of publishing, Hopkins’ *Of One Blood, or, The Hidden Self* and Due’s *My Soul to Keep* share striking features: the depiction of an advanced utopian Ethiopian civilization apart from but within the contemporary world; a contemplation of race through the significance of blood; a blend of spirituality, magic, and ‘hard’ science (that is characteristic of Black women’s science fiction/fantasy, troubling genre categories), and male protagonists whose efforts to ‘protect’ the women they love result in trauma and death. This chapter is ultimately concerned with the gendered dynamics of a specifically black tradition in utopian writing—the construction of an alternate world that imagines African (often Ethiopian) life untouched by the ravages of European colonialism and the traumas and humiliations
of enslavement. This practice often reflects traces of Ethiopianist thought—a cyclical view of history in which the originary greatness of African people is destined to be restored. This urge to restore feminizes the ‘low point’ in the historical cycle (subjection through slavery, colonialism, and contemporary racial oppression) and valorizes heteropatriarchal ‘tradition.’ I argue that Ethiopianist discourse’s elevation of Black women to mythical status within a benevolent patriarchy requires the violent elision of real, contemporary Black women’s personhood and autonomy.

My second chapter, a comparative analysis of two time-travel narratives involving slavery, Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, continues and extends my first chapter’s discussion of the gendered treatment of the past in nationalist discourse. In this chapter, I argue that Black Power Movement discourses contain a posture towards histories of enslavement that privilege violent resistance, hold enslaved people responsible for their own subjection, and—because of Black women’s perceived and sexualized proximity to the white master—render black femininity as particularly suspect. I claim that this posture resonates in contemporary black politics as the discourse of matriarchy, which reads Black women’s efforts to seek autonomy, resources, and redress to their specific gendered concerns as threatening to the project of black liberation. The contemporary narrative of slavery is in its way always inherently speculative, as it revisits the site of enslavement to construct subjectivities that are unrecoverable. This chapter looks at how Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* specifically contests the Black Power era’s feminized constructions of the abjection of the slave that undergird matriarchy discourse. As the film *Sankofa* is popular in Africana Studies pedagogy, I
offer Octavia Butler’s \textit{Kindred} as a companion text that can upset some of \textit{Sankofa’s} more troubling logics. While Butler’s work shows a recurring troubling hesitance to invoke resistance on the part of the less powerful, I argue that her principal intent is to unsettle the simplicity with which resistance is read, interrogate dismissals of slave personhood, and delegitimize characterizations of Black women as having particular instrumentality within the white power structure.

My third chapter focuses upon the crisis of ladyhood in Nicole Sconiers’ short story collection, \textit{Escape from Beckyville}. An accessible commercial work intended for a black female audience, \textit{Escape from Beckyville} critiques both the overt and liberal forms of racism that operate in affluent environments where whites and a very few blacks share space. Her imagined but familiar future scenarios counter the popular metanarratives applied to Black women in U.S. public culture by imagining them realized to dangerous extremes. I argue that perhaps unwittingly, \textit{Escape from Beckyville} critiques the traditional representational impulses of black feminism even as it ascribes to them. While the professed goal of Nicole Sconiers’ work is to broaden representations of Black women beyond well-known stereotypes, it also fosters consideration of the elisions regarding class and sexuality in black feminist cultural criticism that centers such stereotypes. Through fantastic intrusions to the black female body in a futuristic West Los Angeles, Sconiers highlights the inadequacies of disciplinary, representation-based liberal politics in a neoliberal society.

My final chapter looks at the black political implications of Octavia Butler’s revision of the alien encounter in \textit{Dawn}, the first novel of the \textit{Xenogenesis} series. Octavia
Butler refuses to represent the grotesque alien, one of science fiction’s most enduring tropes, as a single-dimensional being. While she constructs insectoid and tentacled creatures that might feel physically familiar as monsters, she endows them with complex, sympathetic personalities and intertwines them with humans in relationships that muddy the waters of power, consent, repulsion, and desire. I argue that Butler’s unique approach to the alien encounter and her preoccupation with the complexity of power is grounded in concerns about black political discourse. In *Dawn*’s depiction of a black female protagonist named Lillith chosen to breed a new race of human-alien hybrids, Butler consciously alludes to the same matriarchy discourse that she takes up more directly in *Kindred*. This recurring concern with disruptive black femininity is key within what I call the black power moment—the resonance of some of the more gendered, sexual, and rhetorical postures of the Black Power Movement absent of its variant expressions and critiques. By opening the human body to queering disruptions, Butler proposes that we rethink the desirability of the black communal body—a beautiful, orderly being that must present its best face to the world.

I privilege black science fiction as a site in which to study black political discourse because the reaches and limits of our imagination reveal the limitations also of our political possibilities—meaning, what can literature freed from the limitations of realism tell us about what we might imagine for our ‘real’ world? What sorts of things happen when the adherence to realism is lifted? What things become possible, and what things manage to stay stable when we are not strictly bound by the ‘natural’ laws and arrangements of the world that we already know? I find Black women’s science fiction to
be most appropriate to look at political discourse as Black women’s fiction has consistently served as a site of critique for black politics’ disciplinary and masculinist orientation. However, while Black women’s fiction often operates from a unique vantage point to destabilize heteropatriarchal assumptions, I don’t assume that Black women authors will always offer the most liberatory possibilities. I look not with a predetermined claim for the intervention offered by Black women’s science fiction, but with curiosity about what these texts might tell us about the black political imagination.
Chapter One
The Gendered Dimensions of Afrotopia: Pauline Hopkins *Of One Blood* and Tananarive Due’s *My Soul to Keep*

Throughout the twentieth century, African American writing about Africa was a reservoir for the political desires and longings of African descendants in the U.S. Frequently, black popular history, academic enterprise, fiction, and nonfiction have overlapped in their turn to Africa as not just a geographical, but a metaphysical, utopian site—a place where a world currently denied to African Americans—a world of wellness, plenty, dignity, and splendor—might be realized. But unlike classical utopias that locate these non-places squarely in unexplored realms or in the future, the utopian depictions of Africa are deeply concerned with the past, with ‘remembering’ and constructing a ‘usable past’ of thriving black life, prior to the apocalyptic experiences of enslavement, colonialism, and forced diaspora. This chapter focuses on two speculative novels by Black women, Pauline Hopkins 1903 *Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self* and Tananarive Due’s 1998 *My Soul to Keep*. Both depict a version of black utopian thought about Africa particular to fiction—the Afrotopia. The Afrotopia is an alternate world that imagines an isolated, advanced African civilization untouched by the ravages of European colonialism and the traumas and humiliations of enslavement. Where such imagining can be a politically productive, and sometimes psychically necessary enterprise, it also often elides ‘real world’ Black women’s complexity and autonomy while associating them with the degradations of a disgraceful racial past.
Though separated by nearly a century of publishing, *Of One Blood* and *My Soul to Keep* feature striking commonalities: the depiction of an advanced utopian Ethiopian civilization that exists apart from but within the contemporary world; a contemplation of both the falsity and reality of race through the significance of blood; a seamless blend of genres including realism, romance, science fiction, and gothic horror; an emphasis on music and women as representative of diaspora blackness and a particularly African American experience; and central male characters whose impulse to ‘protect’ the women they love lead to tremendous violence against them. They also both could be considered domestic fiction, stories written largely by and for middle-class audiences, focusing on the heteronormative love relationships of ideal heroes and heroines. Though Hopkins and Due construct and deploy their Afrotopias in very different ways that reflect their particular sociohistorical moments, both Tellessar and Lalibela serve as sites of retreat for black masculinity, while largely excluding contemporary Black women. Both male protagonists of these novels exercise what I call the *violence of protection* against contemporary Black women outside of the Afrotopia, who are subordinated even as—perhaps because—they are idealized. As discourses of the black racial past associate sexualized violence against Black women with black male emasculation, the ‘protection’ of women becomes a redemptive act for black masculinity. But protection not only leaves in place the logics that provide for violence, it relies upon dominance and the denial of full, autonomous personhood to the ‘dependents’ it seeks to keep safe. In the following analysis, I first examine the gendered dimensions of Afrotopia as it overlaps with Ethiopianist and Afrocentric thought. I then read Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* and Due’s *My
Soul to Keep, to see how their respective Afrotopias function to dramatize the conflicts between black feminine autonomy and black patriarchal desire.

Utopian fiction is recognized as both a subset of science fiction and as a category in its own right—a construction of temporal, spatial, or metaphysical alternatives to contemporary realism that can potentially disrupt the violence of the ‘real world’ by de-normalizing it and envisioning other possibilities. But as utopian fiction is created from actors and vantage points of the real world, it cannot help but contain those very problems it might also subvert. Despite its etymology, utopia can never actually be a “no” place, it, and the histories, ideas, and aspirations that get embedded in it, always pre-exist it. A critical look at traditional genealogies of utopian and science fiction writing—one attuned to issues of race, gender, capitalism, and empire—reveals its deep imbrication with the logics of conquest, racism, eugenics, and a cold, developmental futurity—a futurity that supposes that society will steadily improve under the management of technological progress, and capitalist cosmopolitanism.26,27 However, these traditional genealogies often overlook the anticolonial and nationalist utopias of authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Pauline Hopkins at the turn of the century.28 Spatially, authors such as Pauline Hopkins envisioned utopian sites outside of the boundaries of the U.S. not to propose distant curiosities for exploration, but to suggest the potential psychic and political power of transnational identities, communities, and collaborations of oppressed people of color. Temporally, African American utopian fiction would turn not exclusively or even with the most urgency towards the future, but towards the past. The past, not the future, is where the apocalyptic break that created a new world for African
descended peoples is located, so it stands to reason that that is also where we return for pre-apocalyptic models for black life.

While I adapt the term Afrotopia to identify black utopian fiction’s image of an African civilization, technologically advanced and metaphysically rich, untouched by colonialism but existing within the contemporary world, it is not my own. I take it from the title of Wilson Jeremiah Moses’ study *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* which argues that the debates over Afrocentricity in the academy in the 1980s and 1990s ahistorically decontextualized Afrocentricity from a long tradition of Ethiopianist thought and practice in black popular and scholarly cultures. Frequently referring to Psalms 68:31, “Princes shall come out of Egypt, [and] Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands to God,” Ethiopianism is so named for several connected and, at different historical points overlapping meanings of Ethiopia: the name used to refer to all Sub-Saharan Africa in the King James Bible; a Nile Valley civilization, responsible, many claim for the origins of civilization; and the literal Ethiopia, which successfully resisted the initial Scramble for Africa and defeated Italy’s aggressions in 1896. Reflecting these connotations of biblical prophecy, monumental achievement, and sovereign power, Ethiopianism is a cyclical view of black history that identifies African diasporans as descendants of a great African civilization, in which original African greatness is lost but destined to be restored. Ethiopianism has simultaneously been a mythology, spiritual faith, history, and political philosophy. It is a speculation, but also, for many, a reality—constructed, rigorously researched, and vigorously passed down through generations of both folk history and certain schools within academic Black
Studies. While Moses does not deal extensively with the concept of utopia, he refers to it infrequently when describing Afrocentricity’s idealization of precolonial African life and claims for the African origins of Western civilization.

The African American historiography of decline is a utopianism of the past, based on the belief that African Americans were much less than their ancestors had been, but another tradition foresaw, and rejoiced at, a day when they would achieve all the benefits of first-class American citizenship. Notwithstanding all the talk of decline, whether from virile barbarians or noble savages or stately Ethiopians, they worked out a historiography of progress that became at least as prevalent as the historiography of decline. There developed an alternative utopian teleology in African American thought, which advanced the idea of unstoppable progress toward a racially enlightened and egalitarian society in the future.  

So, unlike the classical utopias described by Ahmad, Ethiopianism’s utopian dimensions are as, if not more, preoccupied with the past as the future. However, this preoccupation with the past does not foreclose developmentalism (a faith in progress, often through technology and autocratic management). Ethiopianism actually embraces a progressive narrative, predicting a rise of Africa and its descendants to a previously glorious status. Yet I question whether this glorious status is necessarily egalitarian, at least in terms of gender. In terms of gender, family, and personal relationships, one of the ways that progress is to be affected [in Ethiopianist thought] is through retrieval of black gender, sexuality, and family formation from the [disorganizing] effects of slavery (which is equated with the low, degraded point in a cyclical historical narrative). This retrieval implies not a transformation of gender, sexual, and familial norms, but a return to precolonial norms. As this return to the precolonial is wrapped up in a utopian imagining of the precolonial and a desire to establish the precolonial as a model for the
present, it often flattens the complexity of various African societies’ familial and social organization, relying on ‘tradition’ to present forms of patriarchy and hierarchy in precolonial Africa as desirable and uncontestable. E. Frances White critiques this process of retrieval, which usually reifies patriarchy and heteronormativity, through her re-reading of the anthropological sources to which Afrocentric thought turn, “It was thus with the concern of maintaining men’s control over women and elders’ control over their juniors that many anthropologists of the 1940s and 1950s explored “traditional” African culture.”  

According to White, these models of pre-apocalyptic African life are constructed through uncritical use of anthropological documents that reflect alliances between European colonial governments and the more powerful members of various African societies, men and elders. The encouragement to adopt, rather than interrogate and transform these ‘traditions’ utilizes the past to “construct utopian and repressive gender relations.” Though of course women also take part in this project (Pauline Hopkins’ discussion of Africa in Of One Blood and nonfiction texts anticipated the claims and concerns of more contemporary Afrocentrists by several decades), it reflects longings particular to masculine psyche—the retrieval of black manhood from the humiliations of subjugation.

Though Moses’ study has no particular emphasis on gender, it is telling that his anecdotal observations of young students’ desire for their academic studies to reflect their popular experience with Afrocentricity are exclusively masculine,

My heart is warmed, not hardened, when I see young men from a culturally impoverished background, dragging around tattered, dog-eared
volumes by Cheikh Anta Diop or Drusilla Dunjee Houston. They are learning, often for the first time, the joys of reading, and may eventually extend this newfound enthusiasm to other authors—perhaps to Shakespeare, Voltaire, Ralph Ellison, John Barth, and Toni Morrison.”

This image coincides with other observations of African American male, working class students’ affinity for Afrocentricity. Might we read something from this coincidence of examples? Does Moses not see young women on these college campuses clutching copies of Afrocentric texts? Does he not see them at all, an elision? Or, are young males especially preoccupied with and committed to an intellectual outlook that promises them a glorious past, where an undisturbed (by slavery, colonialism, racism) masculinity can be practiced? This may be an overreach, but the images of these young black males in Moses’ study are eruptions worth noting.

These comments on Afrocentric thought regarding gender are not meant to digress, or to collapse Ethiopianism, Afrocentricity, and black utopianism as identical and interchangeable. But, following many scholars’ claims that the most highly visible and controversial forms of Afrocentricity (A great deal of quality scholarship using Afrocentricity as a theory and method is not centered on preoccupations with ancient African classical cultures and precolonial life) are more recent iterations of a long tradition of Ethiopianism, and recognizing the influence of Ethiopianism on African American literature depicting Africa, I think gendered critiques of Afrocentricity are relevant to my interest in these two novels. If literary Afrotopias share impulses and aims with the broader body of Ethiopianist/Afrocentric thought, the desires to: counter images of African and black inferiority and pathology, restore history and identity to diaspora peoples subjected to forced displacement and acculturation, and highlight Africa’s
contributions to world history and civilization, then it might also contain its problematics: an upholding of polarities between ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarity’, ahistorical idealization of the African past, and, most importantly for my analysis, the premise that restoring normative gender, sexual, and familial relations, protective patriarchal manhood in particular, is key to African American progress.

As one aspect of my earlier claim that black political discourse feminizes the racial past (particularly slavery), I argue that Afrotopia offers a place for Black men to live out an uninterrupted masculinity—a normative masculinity not compromised by the disorienting and feminizing influence of slavery’s brutalizing and sexualized violence. Afrotopia becomes a site of retreat after both ‘heroes’ of these novels fail to exercise uninterrupted masculinity in the real world, dramatized by their failures to protect the women that they love. These failures result not only from the circumstances aligned against these couples, but from the very act of protection, which subordinates Black women’s autonomy, consent, and full personhood to their partners’ desire to keep them ‘safe.’ This, I refer to, as the violence of protection.

Pauline E. Hopkins (1859-1930) was a playwright, singer, actress, writer, activist and an editor of the Colored American Magazine, prior to its takeover by Booker T. Washington, whose policies she had criticized. Her literary work is part of an outpouring of black literary production in the early twentieth century, and Hopkins believed in the political and transformative possibilities of literature. Of One Blood is the last of a series of her novels that dealt with the biological entanglements of blacks and whites in America, alerting readers, through plots of romance and intrigue popular in the period, to
the fallacy of race. *Of One Blood* was also written in a context in which theories of human taxonomy, ethnology, and anthropology were legitimate sciences which often claimed [distinct origins for different human species]. According to Deborah MacDowell, “Indeed, the argument, propounded through the narrative in various guises, is that the blood has flowed so freely between the races that any attempt to sort and separate them was inevitably cofounded.” However, there is one sense in which Hopkins seems to reinforce the idea of blood as distinctive and legitimizing—by giving her central characters royal blood that endows them with mystical powers and identifies them as heirs to a wondrous Ethiopian kingdom.

*Of One Blood* follows a plain but brilliant hero, Reuel Briggs, a medical student with mystical powers haunted by the spirit of his mother and his own depression. Reuel passes for white and lives in a community of whites, including a best friend, Aubrey Livingston. Reuel and Aubrey both fall in love/obsession with Dianthe Lusk, a mulatto Fisk Jubilee singer who Reuel, through a combination of science and mysticism, brings back from the dead. Reuel marries Dianthe but Aubrey plots to remove Reuel from the picture in order to have Dianthe for himself. Aubrey arranges for Reuel, desperate for funds to support his wife, to travel away for two years on an African mission to discover the lost treasures of Ethiopia. Meanwhile, Aubrey murders his own fiancé, fakes Dianthe’s death, and marries Dianthe under another identity. A grief stricken Reuel stumbles on a hidden, wondrous African kingdom, of which his lotus lily birthmark and mystical powers reveal him to be the long waited king (a royalty passed through the maternal line). He learns about the kingdom and is betrothed to the queen, who reminds
him of his murdered wife. He also discovers that Dianthe is still alive, that Aubrey plotted against him, and that both Dianthe and Aubrey are his full siblings. He returns to America to find Dianthe already dying by a poison. Under mystical influence, Aubrey takes his own life, in accordance with law that members of the royal family should execute themselves when found guilty of murder. Reuel, taking his Black grandmother Hannah, returns to the Hidden City, marries Queen Candace, and rules.

Critics have commented extensively on Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self’s ‘unruly’ plot. Just as the book has two distinct titles joined as one, it seems to marry two very distinctive plotlines, that depart in content, style, and tone. Where one plot is realistic domestic fiction, resembling Hopkins’ other novels in its miscegenated characters and love triangles, the other is a fantastical revision of the African adventure story. Most readings of the African plot interpret it as an expression of Pan African and emigrationist sensibilities, a refutation of black inferiority through the retrieval of African identity, and a proposition of utopian possibilities for full personhood in the midst of the violent rollback of the fragile gains of abolition and Reconstruction. I don’t necessarily disagree with these readings, but I do want to draw attention to their gendered and sexual implications. The most generous critical readings of Hopkins’ Afrotopia tend to reproduce a feminization of the racial past that excuses masculine violence against the, (for lack of a better term) ‘real’ woman who most readily exemplifies the product of that past.

The novel’s central heroine, Dianthe Lusk, (named for the wife of militant abolitionist John Brown) seems, at first glance, to be a classic tragic mulatta. Taken
advantage of by an unscrupulous employer (who weakens her mind through mesmeric experimentation) she is injured and rendered amnesiac by a train wreck, to be revived through Reuel’s combined mystical and medical power. Her true identity kept from her, Dianthe lives as a vulnerable white woman, devoid of family, who agrees to marry one man only to be abandoned by him and abducted and forced into marriage by another, who eventually kills her. Dianthe has presented a consistent problem for generations of critics attempting to read the novel in terms of its productivity for black political thought and desire. According to Kassanov, whose discussion of Of One Blood in the context of the masculinist politics of New Negro discourse is one of the most critical studies of gender in the novel says of Dianthe, “It is curious that Of One Blood circulates so persistently around the tragically passive female form. As the eroticized object upon which Reuel and Aubrey practice their unethical feats of mesmerism, Dianthe Lusk represents a fundamental problem in the text.” In her analysis of Black women’s turn-of-the-century domestic novels, Claudia Tate characterizes Hopkins’ portrayal of Dianthe as a sharp departure from the black female domestic novel’s depiction of female agency. In Tate’s study, Of One Blood marks a decline in the faith in domestic romance as an allegory of political desire by shifting to romantic tragedy, but it correspondingly shifts away from a heroine-centered to a hero-centered narrative strategy. As Of One Blood, in its expansion beyond the domestic courtship story, also exceeds the domestic site of the United States, suggesting promise for African American personhood beyond the confines of the U.S. (and, correspondingly, the domestic novel’s frustrated aspiration to full citizenship and humanity in the post-Reconstruction era), one might suggest that the turn
from the heroine-centered text and female-centered concerns to more masculine struggles coincides with broadening plots and broadening black political strategies.

However, this suggestion threatens to reproduce the idea that female narratives are somehow less political (I mean here, concerned with the collective challenges, conditions, and destinies of Black people) and that masculine narratives are somehow less domestic (I mean here, less concerned with anxieties surrounding courtship, the home, and family formation), and that, because of this, masculine narratives are more politically relevant. The very interdependence of the two plotlines in *Of One Blood: The Hidden Self* reveals the utter inextricability of the domestic and political. But, more pertinent to my analysis, I also want to push back on the idea that *Of One Blood* represents such a departure from female agency, particularly in the figure of Dianthe. Rather, I suggest that her agency is not legible within logics of appropriate black femininity, or within readings of the novel that tend to minimize the struggle between Reuel and Dianthe in the interest of a treating Reuel as a noble hero and generously reading the Afroptopia that rewards him with a preferable counterpart than Dianthe in the “pure” Queen Candace.

To rethink Dianthe as merely passive and manipulated, we might first look at her as a laborer. She enters the novel (bodily, her first appearance is as an apparition) as a gifted and skillful soloist with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. We learn after her accident that Dianthe left the Fisk Jubilee Singers to work for a traveling mesmeric physician. Though we do not get Dianthe’s narrative perspective to learn the reasons for this abrupt departure, we can see it as an expression of her independent will and desires. As a single
Black woman at the turn of the century, Dianthe would not have had many opportunities to make a comfortable living for herself, (A dilemma that Pauline Hopkins, who also worked as a performer before her tenure at the Colored American, and who never married, would be familiar with) and this physician offered “a large salary.”

When we consider that all three siblings, Reuel, Aubrey, and Dianthe seemed to have inherited an inclination for the metaphysical, we might also see her interest in this line of work as driven by this affinity. She enters the employment of a female practitioner, perhaps believing herself to be safer in such a situation. In the rush to identify Dianthe solely as an object of manipulation, this choice as an expression of independence and desire is often overlooked.

Unfortunately, this employment does not end well for Dianthe, exemplifying the work force as often a site of exploitation, rather than liberation, for Black women. When Reuel and Aubrey discover her again, not only is she suffering traumatic brain injury from a train wreck, but the mental damage of excessive mesmeric experimentation. Reuel revives Dianthe from a near-death state but, rather than help her recover her identity, he withholds it, further incapacitating her ability to function independently. From this point forward we should read her behavior not as a characteristic female passivity but as the struggle of a young woman with no memory of who she is, no family support, and mental illness to survive by whatever means she can. This means, for a time, becomes her beauty and her sexuality, which Reuel and Aubrey both gain access to by taking advantage of her isolation and her mental incapacitation, which their control is dependent upon maintaining.
Reuel and Dianthe’s relationship show, as contrary to some readings, not a purely motivated, romantic courtship, but an imbalanced power arrangement, pragmatic on both sides. Dianthe consents to marry Reuel not out of passion but a desire for safety, which his adoration of her suggests that he will provide. Reuel only achieves this consent through deception and the forceful negation of her full personhood. Reuel admits as much when he claims the injured Dianthe as an ‘opportunity’ to achieve the sexual and domestic desires that he doesn’t believe he can earn on his own merits.

“I will marry her in spite of hell itself. Marry her before she awakens to consciousness of her identity. I’m not unselfish; I don’t pretend to be. There is no sin in taking her out of the sphere where she was born. God and science helping me, I will give her life and love and wifehood and maternity and perfect health...I have not the manner nor the charm which wins women. Men like me get love from them which is half akin to pity, when they get anything at all. It is but the shadow. This is my opportunity for happiness; I seize it.”

Reuel makes this decision to marry Dianthe, to conceal her identity, to change her life, before she even recovers, openly declaring that this decision is provoked not only by attraction, but of awareness of her trauma-induced vulnerability as an “opportunity.” He refers to the “sphere where she was born” as having no value whatsoever, despite the value it may have had for her. Dianthe’s physical description establishes her white appearance, yet she willingly identifies with a black identity, represented by her mastery of black spirituals as an artistic form, “All the horror, the degradation from which a race had been delivered were in the pleading strains of the singer’s voice. It strained the senses almost beyond endurance.” Dianthe’s voice simultaneously holds anguish, pain, beauty, history; it is the sensory experience of blackness.
While Reuel frames his denial of Dianthe’s blackness as protection, it is ultimately about self-preservation—to help Dianthe restore her identity would not only help her to regain her independence (and enable her to not choose him), it would expose his own hidden race. In looking as white as Reuel and Aubrey but choosing not to live as white, Dianthe exhibits a courage, and a deeper understanding of the multidimensional content of blackness that Reuel lacks. I don’t mean to make a moral judgment on passing, which we can look at as a resistance of the legal and social demands that determine identity according to a one-drop rule or as a survival strategy that cannot be separated from the oppressive constraints of white supremacy. But passing has psychic costs that Reuel’s depression and anxiety make clear: loss of community, constant fear and self-policing, and inability for true intimacy with others (as opposed to Aubrey whose unawareness allows him to pass through life happy-go-lucky white man). Blackness in Of One Blood is not merely a troubled biological or legal category, it is a vibrant sociality and performance that unites the traumatic and the fulfilling, which Dianthe exemplifies in her mastery of what Du Bois called the sorrow songs. Just as Reuel lives in terror of being discovered, he fears Dianthe’s recovery of her musical passion,

The grand, majestic voice that had charmed the hearts from thousands of bosoms, was pinioned in the girl’s throat like an imprisoned song-bird. Dianthe’s voice was completely gone along with her memory. But music affected her strangely, and Reuel watched her anxiously. Her face was a study in its delicate, quickly changing tints, its sparkle of smiles running from the sweet, pure tremor of the lovely mouth to the swift laughter of eyes and voice. Mindful of her infirmity, Reuel led her to the conservatory to escape the music. She lifted her eyes to his with a curious and angelic light in them. She was conscious that he loved her with his whole most loving heart. She winced under the knowledge, for while she believed in him, depended upon him, and gathered strength from his love, what she gave in return was but a slight, cold affection compared with his adoration.
He brought her refreshments in the conservatory, and then told his love and asked his fate. She did not answer at once, but looked at his plain face, at the stalwart elegance of his figure, and again gazed into the dark, true, clever eyes, and with the sigh of a tired child crept into his arms, and into his heart for all time and eternity.43

I quote this passage at length in order to demonstrate its depiction of abusive control and resignation, rather than mutual love. Reuel watches Dianthe reacting to music with anxiety, allegedly out of concern for her health. But, rather than being “affected strangely,” Dianthe seems to be enjoying the music, which taps into who she was before her brain injury, the full personhood that she cannot grasp. Fearful of her recovery of this personhood, Reuel leads her away, allegedly “mindful of her infirmity” to “escape the music.” This is an example of how the very strategies of protection applied to women are actually aimed at masculine self-protection; it is Reuel, not Dianthe, who threatens to suffer from exposure to music and recovery of her memory. By removing her from music, he literally suppresses her voice, which represents an autonomy that cannot coexist with the patriarchal masculinity that Reuel is attempting to exercise. It is in this moment, in removing her from music (which seemed to be bringing her nothing but a joy experienced independently of him) that he proposes to her. Removed from the source of strength that her mind was grasping to regain, she grasps the source in front of her, a man who appears to love her with the passion that has been excavated from her life. In the entire scene, we never hear Dianthe’s voice, that her connection with music threatened to liberate.

These selfish attempts to protect Dianthe, while failing to hear her, are pivotal in the tragedy that befalls the couple. After his failure to find employment, Reuel’s decides,
without consulting her, to go on a dangerous but highly paid anthropological expedition to Africa.\textsuperscript{44} Still completely trusting of Aubrey Livingston, Reuel is unaware of his friend’s careful plot against him to gain access to Dianthe: by placing her under guardianship of his fiancé’s family, sabotaging Reuel’s chances of employment, and orchestrating Reuel’s departure and assassination. Dianthe still has the power of intuition, and knows that something is amiss with Aubrey, reacting enough to him that others can casually perceive it, “And I have fancied that the beautiful Mrs. Briggs is his Clarisse. What do you think? She shudders every time he draws near, and sinks to the ground under the steady gaze of his eye. Odd, isn’t it?”\textsuperscript{45}

That Dianthe fears Aubrey enough for casual bystanders to perceive it but Reuel still leaves her in Aubrey’s care is a puzzling point in the narrative. Is this just an oversight on the part of Hopkins, or further indication of Dianthe’s silencing by the varying levels of violence that she suffers? Did Dianthe, still unable to fully function in her fragmented and distorted reality, doubt her own intuition so much she declined to speak up? Did Reuel ignore, refuse to consult, or disregard Dianthe’s feelings in this matter, as he merely laughs and “closed her lips with warm lingering kisses” when she desperately begs him not to leave?\textsuperscript{46} Whether there was ever a conversation about how she felt about Aubrey is something we can only speculate upon, but Reuel’s decision-making in regards to the African expedition, while perhaps well-meaning, is yet another example of his refusal to engage Dianthe as an equal. It is also an example of his prioritization of a patriarchal desire—to provide according to the standards of respectable domestic life, over what Dianthe seemed to desire most in the aftermath of her
traumatizing injuries—safety. Later in the novel, Dianthe confronts Reuel, “The friend into whose care you gave me has acquired the power over me that you alone possessed, that power sacred to our first meeting and our happy love. Why did you leave me in the power of a fiend in human shape, to search for gold? There are worse things in life than poverty.” In these few lines, Dianthe calls Reuel out on his sublimation of her voice and consequently, her safety, his capitalistic value system, and his exploitation of her vulnerability. As we can see from reading the deceptions of their courtship and Dianthe’s unenthusied capitulation to his proposal, we might even read the phrase “happy love” as sarcastic.

When Reuel, the source of strength that Dianthe had been forced to draw on in the absence of her own identity and voice leaves, she begins to recover her musicality, and with that, tentatively, who she is. Shortly after he departs she, seemingly possessed, begins to play and sing “Go Down Moses,” to an audience of Livingston, his fiancée Molly Vance, and their friends. As she sings she seems to be partly possessed, partly accompanied, by the spirit of her mother, who was enslaved at the Livingston mansion,

A weird contralto, veiled as it were, rising and falling upon every wave of the great soprano, and reaching the ear as from some strange distance. The singer sang on, her voice dropping sweet and low, the echo following in, and at the closing word, she fell back in a dead faint.

At this point, Dianthe knows that something has been kept from her. She begins to recover not just an individual but a plural (perhaps suggesting that the black identity represented by her voice is not just an individual, but plural, collective identity) voice, but she still cannot recall her story for herself, and has to ask Livingston for the truth. By framing her story for her, by treating the truth of her blackness as only a degradation
from which only he can save her, he is initially able to retain control (with the assistance of mesmeric powers, “invisible forces” that he uses to seduce her against her will). But eventually, as Dianthe exercises her power of voice and learns more from the spirit of her mother and from meeting her grandmother, she begins to gain greater clarity. Only after recovering her memories firsthand, determining her identity for herself, does Dianthe act to resist. Dianthe manipulates Aubrey to throw him off track, then, with the assistance of some supernatural force (it is unclear whether this is the spirit of her mother, intervention of her spiritualist, root-working grandmother, or her own mesmeric power) attempts to kill him:

Arrested by the same trance-like yet conscious power that bound his form but left perception free, Aubrey neither spoke nor moved...then he, with sidelong glance, beheld her, as rapidly as thought, take up the night glass standing on his table, and for the glass containing cold water, which it was his custom to swallow every morning upon first awakening, substitute one which, he had seen from the first, she carried in her hand. This done, the stealthy figure moved away, gently drew back the door, and would have passed; but no—the spell was broken.49

Able somehow to shake the supernatural force holding him down, Aubrey overpowers Dianthe and forces her to drink the poison she had prepared for him, which is what ultimately causes her agonizing death the next day. Unlike most critics’ accounts of her death which narrate it simply as Aubrey’s murder of her or her hopeless suicide, closely reading this scene reveals that she is neither a victim just of Aubrey’s violence or her own despair. She challenges him and struggles for her life, though she does not survive. I think it is important to reclaim Dianthe’s agency in this moment. Over attention to Dianthe’s passivity and to the white male sexual exploitation that Aubrey exercises against her tend to draw critical attention away from Reuel’s violence—and how it
exemplifies the novel’s less obvious struggle between black masculinity and black feminine autonomy. Her death in the arms of Reuel, who arrives too late to save her, is a judgment on him as well as Aubrey. While most readings of the novel focus on the racialized sexual exploitation of Dianthe by Aubrey as representative of white masculinity, closer attention to the dynamics of Reuel and Dianthe’s relationship require a confrontation of black masculinity. White and Black men may not have the same access to privilege in the public realm, but this does not, as some may claim, foreclose their deployment of the same kinds of violence in the domestic realm. While Reuel does not physically abuse or rape Dianthe, his psychic abuse renders her vulnerable to the violence she suffers at Aubrey’s hands.

We should acknowledge that Reuel’s villainy is different from Aubrey’s because of their differing contexts. White supremacy limits Reuel’s options and places far greater pressure on his choices. Had he been able to find employment commensurate with his gifts and training, he would not have had to leave Dianthe in Aubrey’s hands, a dilemma a white man would not have had to face. However, we might argue that these additional pressures demand that Black men and women are even more vigilant about engaging as equals, in order to meet such challenges and pressures with the joint force of their ideas, experiences, and critical judgment. Black people’s exclusion from traditional gender norms (and lack of the structural conditions that support the perpetuation of those norms) provide an opportunity for other ways of negotiation—but more often this eviction/exile/seems to provoke a longing to assert gendered norms as a form of resistance to the white supremacy that makes them both desirable and impossible to achieve.
Bergman’s psychoanalytical study of *Of One Blood* portrays the novel as a search for the mother, in this case, the ghostly, estranged mother that haunts both Reuel and Dianthe’s dreams, that stands in for Africa. Read in this light, what does the fate of Dianthe say to us? It seems that by her death and his repatriation to Tellesar, Reuel is freed from the complications (incest) presented by the estrangement from their actual mother incurred by slavery. Instead of having to reclaim his sister/lover and struggle with the messy inheritance of slavery’s violence upon motherhood, he is conveniently freed to leave the shame of the U.S. to bind himself to the more uncomplicated, prideful African identity of the pure and isolated Meroe. Thus, the Afrotopia becomes a place that removes the pressures of white supremacy, that allows black manhood to play itself out, unfettered. Yet it also must remove the complex subjectivities that have evolved in the context of those pressures. This points to the violence of Afrotopian thought; it elides real Black women in favor of the simpler and shinier figure of ‘Nubian queens,’ whom they only vaguely resemble.

Dianthe’s moment of death is preceded by a dramatic, ecstatic moment that suggests a magnificent homegoing,

The unseen mass must have been the disembodied souls of every age since Time began, so vast and so strong the footfalls. And then the chant of thousands of voices swelling in rich, majestic choral tones, joined in the thundering crash. It was the welcome of ancient Ethiopia to her dying daughter of the royal line.

This scene is often interpreted as her reincarnation as Queen Candace, Reuel’s betrothed in Tellessar, who according to Reuel, she resembles. Though this scene is intriguing, I cannot take it seriously as a reincarnation, as Reuel has already met and
betrothed Candace, who is very much alive before Dianthe’s death. Rather, I think this suggestion of Dianthe’s spiritual homegoing and some kind of metaphysical union with Candace is used to compensate for her vicious demise and her exile from Tellessar. Her soul may be welcome, but her violated, miscegenated, impure body is not.

Miscegenation and incest were closely connected in antebellum and Victorian thought, law and literature, both improper minglings of blood that threatened systems of privilege and inheritance. According to Christina Sharpe, “Slavery provides both a time and space (real and fantastic) where to commit incest or amalgamation is to break the same law and the imminent rupture and onset of forgetting that break around which some cultural or national formation has taken hold.” Hopkins’ conflation of miscegenation and incest serves as a pointed critique of white southern patriarchy, which actually legalized and naturalized both taboos in the unchecked power of generations of slaveowners over generations of Black enslaved women (some their own biological daughters and the offspring or mistresses of their male relatives). For African Americans, miscegenation and incest were both enabled by slavery’s violence upon Black families and so served as major sources of anxiety in the Victorian era struggle to leverage the integral, sexually-ordered black home and family as sites of both resistance and inclusion. Kassanov points to miscegenation as a particularly fraught site of anxiety in turn-of-the-century New Negro masculinist discourse,

It is not surprising then that the black maternal body functioned as a site of significant New Negro intervention. As Fortune and others argued, miscegenation has historically been perpetuated by white men upon the unwilling bodies of African American women. New Negro intellectuals consequently sought to exercise control over those bodies.
We might see Reuel’s efforts to “protect” Dianthe as an attempt to control her body. The novel preserves Reuel’s sexual integrity by distancing him from Dianthe on the day of their marriage, therefore preventing its consummation. But her subsequent marriage to Aubrey signals both Reuel’s failure to control her body and her imbrication into the very cycle of incest and miscegenation that threatened African American efforts to rescue their kinship relationships from slavery’s traumatic displacements. As a woman and the locus of reproduction, Dianthe cannot be allowed to survive this. Removing her body from the narrative also removes the possibility of her reproduction of the sexual shame of slavery—particularly the threat that that shame poses to a black masculinity attempting to adhere to dominant masculine norms. She is then replaced with a preferable alternative of black femininity. As Sundquist says, “Hopkins’ proto-Faulknerian miscegenation plot allows Briggs’s fiancé, Dianthe, a beautiful Fisk Jubilee singer who turns out to be his half-sister, to be replaced by a more appropriate mate, the virgin queen Candace…In Africa, perhaps, he will escape the “mongrelization” that Blyden thought destructive of African purity in the United States.”

The dramatic love triangle of Of One Blood might have been enough to sustain an entire novel, without the sudden intrusion of the Afrotopian storyline of Reuel’s journey to Tellessar. As the last novel that Hopkins wrote and one of the texts that signals the decline of both Black women’s domestic fiction and the Uplift Era in which it flourished, many critics read the African storyline as a shift to a more militant, global politics, away from genteel claims for inclusion according to American middle-class norms. I do not disagree with this reading, but I do want to examine how the departure from the domestic
of the U.S. in *Of One Blood* is still domestic in terms of its motivations—still wrapped up in anxieties about gender, sexuality, and family formation. According to Ahmad, “The novel’s two plots, the American and the utopian, may frequently seem mismatched; but their coexistence in the same book show how ancient glory has degenerated under the system of slavery ‘in this new continent,’ and why utopia is thus so necessary.”⁵⁹ So here, we see that Afrotopia is envisioned as a resurrection of ‘ancient glory,’ directly opposed to the degeneration that is black life under enslavement. I contend that Afrotopia aspires to a pre-modern blackness that can be disentangled from the sexualized shame of slavery excludes post-slavery, post-modern black femininity. Tellesar offers a place where Reuel can live out an uninterrupted masculinity, with a more appropriate counterpart in the “pure” Queen Candace.

After a few weeks in Ethiopia, Reuel is notified that Dianthe was killed in a boating accident (a false death orchestrated by Aubrey, who murdered his fiancé and forced Dianthe into marriage). Overcome with grief, Reuel gets lost deep in the caverns of Meroe, and stumbles into the kingdom of Tellessar. He meets a guide Ai, who introduces him to the kingdom, reveals him to be its long-awaited heir Ergamenes, and introduces him to the Queen Candace, who he is destined to marry. Candace lives with her attendants in the innermost cloister of Meroe, home only to the city’s virgins. In Tellessar virgin queens rule for a time, retire, then appoint their successor, to rule alone until the crown prince returns. The scene of Reuel and Candace’s meeting and betrothal is a dramatic departure from his American life. Rather than being a poor, clumsy, moody student unable to gain the love of a beautiful woman without deception or to gain
employment to support her, Reuel, in the presence of Candace is suddenly important and powerful. He expresses a confidence in this sexually-charged scene that he has not had before,

The heavy curtains were lifted now, and discovered the Queen reclining upon a pile of silken cushions—a statue of Venus worked in bronze. “The Queen is here!” exclaimed a voice. In an instant all present prostrated themselves upon the floor. Reuel alone stood erect, his piercing eyes fixed upon the woman before him. Grave, tranquil and majestic, surrounded by her virgin guard, she advanced gracefully, bending her haughty head; then, gradually her sinuous body bent and swayed down, down, until she, too, had prostrated herself, and half-knelt, half-lay upon the marble floor at Reuel’s feet...Knowing now what was expected of him, he raised the queen with one hand, addressed her courteously in Arabic, led her to her silken couch, seated himself, and would have placed her beside him, but she, with a gesture of dissent, sank upon the cushions at his feet that had served her for footstools.60

Interrupting his despair, Reuel is suddenly gifted with an incredible opportunity, to marry a beautiful woman and live as king of a wondrous nation. Ironically, the very black blood that he had spent his life cursing and trying to escape is the only quality which secures this fantastic destiny. It is no wonder that Reuel suddenly moves on rather quickly from the woman he had professed to love for a lifetime, “Dianthe was gone. The world outside held nothing dear to one who had always lived much within himself. Why not accept this pleasant destiny which held its alluring arms so seductively to him?”61

This passage is telling in its sexualized conflation of the throne of Tellessar with Candace’s body. But I echo Reuel, why not accept such an uncomplicated, majestic identity, untroubled by the various humiliations of black life in America? Why not, instead of grappling with a world that excludes black people from the very modes of gendered being that are held up to them as examples, in lieu of struggling with a complex
woman’s autonomy, retreat into a wonderland where a pure, protected virgin literally throws herself at his feet? The hastiness with which Reuel moves on from Dianthe, and the convenience of the destiny that seems to offer him everything his American life and identity lacked, makes it difficult for me to concur with critical claims that Reuel’s final acceptance of an African identity is some kind of moral triumph.

Nevertheless, this is prominently how Reuel’s discovery and embrace of his royal lineage is read, a reading that coincides with an abandonment of Dianthe as a locus for chattel slavery’s sexual perversions. According to Salvant, “In several critical readings, the shift from the American to the African setting in the novel’s final act has been considered a morally cleansing recontextualization because the change of venue leaves Dianthe behind (dead) and abandons the context of American slavery from which the incest problem stems.” Davidson interprets the tragedy of the American storyline as representing “the difficulty for African Americans to structure safe and productive racial homes.” Though she does extensively critique Reuel’s mistreatment of Dianthe, Davidson ultimately lets him off the hook by locating his redemption in the experience of journeying to an African homeland, discovering a proud African identity, and establishing a home with Queen Candace. Emphasizing “the necessity for establishing and protecting the proper racial home as a foundation for the Black nation,” she claims

Because Aubrey and Dianthe are unaware of/or ashamed of their African heritage, they cannot reap its royal benefits. Although Reuel, Aubrey, and Dianthe are all of one blood, it is assumed that only Reuel receives and accepts a psychological transformation and experiences empowerment due to his direct experience with a positive ancient African history and culture. The ultimate marriage of Reuel and Candace suggests the utopian possibility of a relationship of equals between the Black man and woman, forming a strong foundation for the global Black nation.
The words littered throughout this analysis—‘positive’, ‘safe’, ‘productive’, ‘proper’—all serve as code for a home centered around the patriarchal, heterosexual nuclear family, somehow presuming that this particular family form negates the possibility of violence and is a necessary foundation for change in the conditions of black life—a change that must be rooted in the concept of nationhood. This perspective reveals the close relationship, at least in terms of familial discourse, between white and black nationalisms and an [acceptance of the heteronormative and classist assumptions embedded into nationalist thought.] Though in some places Davidson chides Reuel for denying Dianthe’s blackness, she also elides it (the complex blackness of real diasporic experience) by locating ‘psychological transformation’ and ‘empowerment’ only in the Afrotopian identity. Acknowledging Reuel’s role in the subjugation of Dianthe but glossing over the novel’s failure to make him accountable for it, she relies on a comparative polarizing of Dianthe and Candace, “Thus, the Black woman is sexually exploited and silenced in the domestic Black nation by the white male power structure, but also by the Black male because of his collusion with the white male power structure as a being seeking inclusion. By contrast, in the global nation the Black woman is empowered by her sacred and protected position that the Black male (and the community) places her in.” Davidson seems to suggest that intraracial patriarchy is only a result of collusion with white supremacy, and that movement to the Afrotopia, where such white supremacy is removed, can evacuate it, not questioning how the very ideas of “sacred” (which connotates sexual purity) and “protected” (which suggests control) are
patriarchal discourses as well. Similarly, Melissa Asher Daniels reads Candace as a powerful alternative image to Dianthe,

In the figure of Queen Candace, Hopkins signifies on the trope of black leadership to tackle the issue of gender. Providing an alternative portrait of black femininity that challenges the historical narrative of rape and sexual abuse, Hopkins presents readers with a chaste female monarch...Powerful and revered, the physically charismatic Candace contrasts with Dianthe’s ethereal, passive, and tragic mulatta.\textsuperscript{68}

Dohra Ahmad makes a similar claim in her study of anticolonial utopian literature, “Queen Candace had guarded Telassar as it awaited its male heir, with the help of a coterie of virgins who serve as a symbolic compensation for the centuries-long violation of African women in America.”\textsuperscript{69} Again, we see here the idea that Candace’s chasteness allegedly compensates for Dianthe’s exposure to sexualized violence. This reads dangerously close to a virgin-whore dichotomy which supports rather than challenges historical narratives of sexual violence. In the context of African American men’s historical inability to protect the sexual virtue of their wives and daughters, there may be something psychically comforting about the image of a black virgin queen. Yet, this image valorizes the impulse to “protect” that was actually key in Dianthe’s demise. Simply valorizing virginity does not allow for a critical consideration of the incestuous relationship between discourses of purity and sexual violence, protection and control. It suggests that Candace is a progressive, preferable version of the soiled, abused Dianthe, the Black woman cleansed of racial violence and elevated to the pedestal—but that Black woman’s death is necessary for this elevation to take place, and that death is largely incurred by Reuel’s attempt to claim patriarchal privilege and power, that his ascent to a position of patriarchal power in Tellesar does nothing to trouble. For I also want to read
against this claim that the relationship between Reuel and Candace represents a greater relationship of equality, or as Asher claims, a “post-patriarchal” fantasy. In the one scene where we see Candace, she literally vacates her seat of power to Reuel—a young unknown man who has been living as white in a distant land, with no governing experience—and, even refusing his feeble effort to seat her beside him, places herself at his feet. One might say that this is due to Reuel’s blood right to the throne, but that reveals another problem in much of Afrotopian thought, its romantic turn to discourses of monarchial royalty within a nation-state structure—a hierarchical and anti-democratic system for organizing social and political life. Her ready submission to Reuel exemplifies critiques of the image of the ‘Nubian queen’ in more recent expressions of black cultural nationalism in hip hop and popular culture. For example, as Shanara Reid-Brinkle claims in her analysis of the use of queen in Essence chatboards responding to Black women’s images in hip hop video:

“Real” black women are constructed as “queens,” or women who are deserving of respect. The “queen” identity recycles the ideology of the “cult of true womanhood” in which women who perform their genders appropriately are placed on a pedestal as representatives of the purity and goodness of the race. For black women, the “queen” identity provides an opportunity to resist dominant stereotypes that position black women as unable to access this pedestal because of their racial difference.

Readings of Dianthe and Queen Candace that construct Candace as the pure oppositional feminine presence to Dianthe, and a worthier counterpart to the would-be king Reuel sound strikingly like this queen-ho discourse, a specifically black cultural configuration of the virgin-whore dichotomy that reproduces, rather than challenges violence against women. Though Dianthe is read more with pity than with judgment for
her failure to achieve sexual purity, it is suggested that her inability (or rather, lack of opportunity) to access the siblings’ ancient African identity makes her vulnerable to sexual victimization.

Even Kassanov’s excellent study, one of few to probe Of One Blood’s engagement of gendered discourse of the New Negro occasionally demonstrates the logic that Dianthe’s inability to access a glorious African origin is key to her vulnerability, “Hopkins implies that because Dianthe is unable to retrieve her original identity, she is compelled to accept the passive subjectivity forced upon her by the novel’s men.”

Though I agree that Dianthe is for a time incapacitated by psychological trauma and by Reuel and Aubrey’s manipulations of her memory loss, she does eventually recover her memory and resist. Her attempt to kill Aubrey is the most courageous act in the novel. It is not motivated by the discovery of an ancient African past, but through reconnection to and with the assistance of a female lineage, the rediscovery of a collective black female voice.

Whereas Candace is the bodily embodiment of Afrotopia as a site for the existence of blackness unfettered by the legacies of enslavement, Dianthe, like the sorrow song, represents the inextricable trauma and beauty of actual, contemporary black life. In reading Reuel’s ascent to the throne of Tellessar as a productive embrace of African identity, critical strategies often excuse him for his violence against Dianthe and juxtapose her unsuccessful black femininity against Candace’s preferable black femininity. Though the judgments of Dianthe’s disturbing passivity might be justifiable to some extent, how do we compare this passivity to that of Candace, who we only see in
one scene lying supine, prostrated, and even kneeling before Reuel? More than passivity, readings that elevate Candace above Dianthe are wrapped up in ideas of both racial and sexual purity. Candace, fully black (though her ancestry would predate ideas of racial blackness) and protected within a cloister of virgins, represents a preferable black femininity for a male psyche conditioned by discourses of patriarchy and protection that are impossible for black males, particularly at the violent turn of the twentieth century, to safely achieve. Meanwhile, Dianthe somehow comes to stand alone for the incest, sexual violence, and shame of American chattel slavery, that must be excavated in order for Reuel to embrace this ancient, ‘pure’ African identity. Reuel’s most virtuous act is returning to America in the attempt to rescue Dianthe but her death removes him from any obligation to her—or need to develop a healthier relationship to his blackness or sense of black collectivity. Rather than demanding that Reuel deal with history, represented by his inadvertent marriage to his sister; rather than allowing her to survive so that Reuel must grapple with his violence, his betrayal, his uncritical exercise of patriarchy, and even his incestuous desire, the narrative does away with her altogether.

Therefore, despite suggestions of “psychological transformation” it is never demonstrated that the converted African Reuel is any different from the Reuel that passed for white. [Reuel’s failure to protect Dianthe is read as the impossibility of black life rather than the falsity of ‘protection’ itself.] In the urge to read Telessar as a progressive alternative to American degradation, several critics have reproduced Ethiopianism’s cyclical narrative. This narrative, I argue, tends to prioritize a cultural and psychic nationalism heavily invested in a feminization of racial trauma, and which discourages
political claims for redress and resources as it renders contemporary Black women (who refuse or are unable to adhere to Afrotopian models of complementary womanhood) as suspect.

On the surface, there might seem to be little reason to juxtapose texts as far apart chronologically as Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* and Tananarive Due’s *My Soul to Keep*. But in addition to the content similarities mentioned at the opening of this chapter, as well as both books’ genre-bending blends of realism, romance, Gothic horror, the supernatural, utopia, and science fiction, I believe there are ways in which both books dramatize the black political discourse of their respective sociopolitical contexts, demonstrating both some continuities and departures of that discourse. The daughter of Civil Rights Movement activists, Due, like Hopkins, was raised in an atmosphere of explicitly politically engaged black social consciousness which informs her cultural work. Published in 1998 on the heel of Terri McMillan’s immense success with earthy romances featuring and aimed at black middle class women and sharing an emphasis on black women’s stories of love, sexuality, and family formation, Tananarive Due’s speculative horror, like Hopkins’ serials, might also be referred to as the domestic romance of its own turn-of-the-century, post-Reconstruction moment. In fact, we might even draw parallels between the historical-political moments of the books’ publications; Like the Uplift Era with which late nineteenth and turn-of-the century domestic fiction is associated, the nineties and earliest years of the new millennium (which saw political phenomena such as The Million Man March, the Welfare Reform Act of 1994, a standing ovation to Bill Cosby’s pound cake tirade at the NAACP 2004
national convention) might be said to be a period in which the black family figured centrally in both broader and intraracial politics.

Since Hopkins’ ‘rescue’ from obscurity in scholarly projects such as that of Hazel Carby’s iconic 1987 *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Henry Louis Gates’ 1988 collection of Hopkins’ serial novels, and Claudia Tate’s 1993 *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, *Of One Blood* has been subjected to hundreds of studies. At the date of this writing, I am unaware of any published peer-reviewed treatments of Tananarive Due’s *My Soul to Keep*. This may be due to its status as popular fiction sharing a market and audience relationship similar to authors in the nineties like Terri McMillan and Eric Jerome Dickey, or to what Due describes as its smaller scope in comparison to the larger-scale sequels that have attracted a bit more scholarly interest. But I argue that it is this market relationship, popular fiction status, and private sensibility that makes it apt to look at as a site of political discourse, and that it as capable of articulating black political desires as the turn-of-the-century fiction that Claudia Tate undertakes. Though ultimately *My Soul to Keep* demonstrates the unsustainability of Afrotopia and a more complex and productive negotiation of American blackness and gender than *Of One Blood*, it shares in common a use of Afrotopia to dramatize the struggle between black feminine autonomy and black patriarchal protection.

The first in a series of novels about the African Blood Brothers, *My Soul to Keep* tells the story of Jessica Jacobs-Wolde, an ambitious reporter who unwittingly marries a nearly four-hundred-year-old immortal named Dawit, who she knows as David. David is a member of a secret utopian enclave in Lalibela, Ethiopia, housing a cult of sixteenth-
century men led by their prophet-leader Khaldun, who allegedly stole and injected them with Christ’s blood, which has incredible healing and regenerative properties. Allowed to go out into the world but swearing to always keep the Covenant (the secret of their identity) and devote themselves first and foremost to the Brotherhood, the Life Brothers dedicate their days to accumulating knowledge and perfecting skills. Dawit, though he kept the Covenant, had always had more of a fondness for mortals than most of his brothers, particularly women, who are excluded from the Brotherhood. While Jessica and their daughter Kira are not Dawit’s first human family, they are the first to which he is totally committed. As Jessica’s work brings her closer to his secrets he begins manipulating her and killing people close to her to protect his identity. When the Searchers (an order whose job it is to go out to retrieve Life Brothers who linger too long in mortal world) appear, Dawit decides that instead of leaving he will perform the Ritual on Jessica and Kira to keep them immortal with him forever.

Like *Of One Blood, My Soul to Keep* features an advanced, ancient Ethiopian civilization, hidden and apart from the world, the members of which have seemingly magical powers. However, these civilizations differ in significant ways. Whereas Tellesar is a fully-fledged city with families and social organization, that continues itself through natural reproduction, the Life Brotherhood within the city of Lalibela is a male-only space that continues through its members’ immortality. The cult-like society is led by the prophet-teacher-leader Khaldun, who was at the scene of the execution of Christ and allegedly stole a pouch of Christ’s blood, which he used to extend his immortality and remarkable healing abilities to a small church of followers in the sixteenth century. These
followers are all men, because of the fear that women would reproduce the Life Blood in their wombs, enlarging, exposing, and endangering the society beyond control. The Life Brothers live out an alternative model of manhood, a lifestyle not aimed at amassing power, ruling nations, or propagating their beliefs or themselves, but simply a mastery of self and of knowledge. Though they are allowed to foray into the mortal world and enjoy its pleasures, they’re ultimate aspiration seems to be to attain an ascetic discipline mastered by their leader, Khaldun, who lives most of his days in a state of meditation. The misogyny occasionally expressed by the Life Brothers may be an extension of their general posture of disdain towards mortal humans, but it is distinguished and amplified by the absence of women from their collective, the impossibility of engaging female voices.

David, in his original life is a warrior sold into slavery as a child during the Crusades, is a converted Muslim who easily shifts sides and allegiances, “Mahmoud knows his heart; Dawit is drawn to the strong. Perhaps he has not given his heart to any God at all, but only to the army of warriors who cry out God’s many names.” and his goals for joining the Brotherhood are significantly at odds with Khaldun’s mission of discipline, knowledge, and higher consciousness, “A man can die and yet live again? And all wounds will heal as though by miracle? An army of such men would rule for an eternity!” Never completely committed to the Life Brothers’ mission as laid out by Khladun, Dawit repeatedly forays into the mortal world. This is a key difference of the use of Afrotopia in the two novels; in Of One Blood it is an idyllic destination that provides escape from a feminized post-slavery subjectivity and collective blackness,
while in *My Soul to Keep* it is a less idyllic point of origin for the novel’s central male character, who views it as a sterile, dull, homosocial prison preventing him from both the more aggressive masculinity he wishes to exercise and the human connections he seeks. Much of Dawit’s activities over the first few centuries of his immortality involve unbridled warfare and revelry, with little concern for mortal life. However, as Dawit experiences a modernizing world, one in which physical prowess becomes less important and constructs such as race become more salient, his capacity to express a fourth-century, pre-racial masculinity become more constrained, and more focused upon the domesticated site of the nuclear family. His experiences in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries express the attempt to fulfill a frustrated desire—that for heteronormative family (which in his original lifetime was denied him, first through his kidnapping and enslavement, and again through the death of his young wife and baby).

A pivotal moment in David’s shift away from the pre-modern and exclusively male world of Lalibela is Dawit’s fateful decision to go to the United States, where he is captured and enslaved under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act. He falls deeply in love with an enslaved woman, Adele, and they are lynched together as they attempt to escape. This experience bonds him to the United States and African American blackness, revealing blackness not as a stable identity but as a process; intersecting ancestry, violence, trauma, love, survival, affinity, creativity, loss, and corporeal embodiment. Unlike Reuel, Dawit seems to find something desirable in this blackness and remains in the U.S. Like Reuel, his engagement of blackness is primarily through his relationships
with women and through music. Dawit continues to form close relationships primarily with Black women, as a married jazz artist named Seth Tillis in the 1920s and as David Wolde, a sedate university professor of jazz and languages who marries a former student and has a child. Chronicling Dawit’s efforts to hold on to his twentieth century family when his inability to age and the demands of the Life Brotherhood to which he belongs require that he leaves them behind, the novel repeatedly flashes back to his relationship with Adele, and his inability to “save” her becomes key in his determination to hold on to his latest family unit. In many ways his life and relationship with Jessica show a slow maturity over the course of his exceedingly long life: a greater capacity for intimacy with the feminine that is excised from the Life Brother’s world, an ability to be tender and nurturing. He goes from callously abandoning a child in the fifteenth century, to staying with but virtually ignoring his children in the Jazz Age, to being a hands-on, stay-at-home father in the late twentieth century. But despite this slow evolution, David’s tendency towards hierarchy and violence—drawn from his origins in an Afrotopia shaped by ancient gender norms and the superiority complex of a biologically and intellectually advanced “race”—surfaces. Similar to Aubrey’s machinations for Reuel, Dawit’s obligation to the Brotherhood serve as proxy for the pressures on black masculinity that inform—though do not excuse—attempts to suppress Black women’s autonomy.

Similarly to Reuel, Dawit idealizes his last wife, Jessica, but he also deceives, manipulates, and abuses her and those around her. Though, like Reuel, he doesn’t commit physical violence against Jessica herself (at least until the administration of the Life Ritual towards the close of the book) he does act in an abusive, controlling way, not just
in reaction to external circumstances, but also in response to Jessica’s efforts to assert her autonomy. That Dawit/David’s actions stem not just from the threat of the Searchers and his pending return to Lalibela but from an impulse towards aggressive, controlling patriarchy are reflected early in he and Jessica’s courtship. A professor, he dates and marries a far younger college undergraduate, and pressures her to have a child right away, pointing to the way in which women’s reproductive capacity is sometimes used by spouses and partners to restrict mobility and gain control. She moves into his home, which they never alter to suit her tastes and style, and his tastes and decisions dominate their lives.\(^81\) While David appears to support her career, relying on his wealth to leave his job and stay at home with their daughter Kira, he also seems to resent her having interests, friends, and ambitions beyond their life and home. His observation of the delight on Jessica’s face when she is with her colleagues brings to mind Reuel’s anxiety at watching Dianthe’s delight as she listens to music.\(^82\) Rather than taking pleasure in their wives’ pleasure, both are fearful that these autonomous pleasures give the women a pathway out of their control. Jessica seems emotionally fearful of David, constantly second-guessing her own decision-making, dreading communicating to him her independent desires.\(^83\) Following patterns common to abuse, David escalates from manipulation and emotional control to violence, when he kills friends and family members of Jessica in order to keep her from seeing the full truth about him. This violence eventually escalates to being enacted on Jessica and Kira themselves, when he determines, without their consent, to make them immortal so that he can keep them with him always, “‘On my father’s soul,’ he said, and he heard in his vow the voice of the
warrior he had been so very long ago, ‘my wife and child will be with me. I swear it.’”

Though David’s desire to extend immortality to his family may reflect his love for them, it also reflects his own self-interests, his antipathy towards aging, and his desire for monopoly and control over their attention. In this sense, David’s assertion of the role of protector is similar to Reuel’s; he makes choices that dramatically alter his lover’s life without consideration of what she will lose in the process.

The novel shields Dawit/David’s abusive tendencies somewhat by tying his manipulations and eruptions of violence to moments in the narrative that bring Jessica closer to his secret and their family closer to danger when he refuses to return to Lalibela. But tellingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, these moments also coincide with Jessica’s assertions of independence. At the opening of the novel Jessica, an ambitious young journalist, is at work on a potentially award-winning series of articles about abuse and neglect in senior care facilities. Her best friend, an older, gay white male journalist named Peter, invites her to co-write a book on the same topic that promises to dramatically buttress her career. David, when finding out about this opportunity, reacts as angrily and petulantly as Jessica expected. While eventually we learn that Jessica’s research will bring her dangerously close to David’s secret (His daughter Rosalie was a patient in one of these homes, who he killed out of shock and mercy after seeing her degraded condition), David doesn’t know this when he first finds out about the book. Rather, her plans to write a book are an expression of her independent ambition, of her desire for something beyond the family unit they have created,

She could nearly buy into his fantasy of the three of them immersed in one another, secluded from the world. She’d already drifted from most of her
friends, and her mother had only a toehold on her, though she lived just thirty minutes away. Same for her sister, Alexis, a hematologist who lived on Miami Beach. Her fellow sorors with Alpha Kappa Alpha were threatening to boot her out of the alumnae chapter if she didn’t start coming to meetings. All of her spare time was with David and Kira. A part of Jessica wanted to follow David wherever his dreams would take them, but then a voice whispered: What about your dreams?86

Should we see David’s emotional abuse differently because of its foundation in the extraordinary demands of his immortality? David’s jealousy of Jessica’s time is very much informed by his awareness of his impending retrieval by the Life Brothers, his heightened awareness of the brevity of mortal life. But in trying to monopolize Jessica, he subordinates her personal will, failing to account for the fact that he has had centuries to fulfill his ambitions and desires before “settling down.” Perhaps this makes his behavior even more egregious. As her friend Peter bluntly says, “Talk to David, but fight him if you have to. He’s way too possessive of your time. You know that. He’s not looking out for your career, Jess. But I am.”87

Eventually, David does discover that Jessica’s research threatens to expose him. After failing to convince her to abandon the project without alienating her, he devises another way, by killing the friend who was facilitating and encouraging the book deal. Though this murder might be motivated by his fear of discovery, I propose that it is primarily an attempt to isolate Jessica. Such isolation is a key strategy of abusers, to increase their dependence on the abuser alone and prevent them from being able to accurately see and trust their own reality. So brutal, excessive (and unnecessary, as he ends up telling her the truth anyhow) Peter’s murder is also a redirection of David’s rage.
from Jessica to someone else that she loves. Even prior to the book project, David
resented Peter,

“Try as I might—and I do Jess, I really do—I can’t muster that something
you feel…that concern, or whatever it is, that drives you and your bonfire.
But Peter does. And for that reason, he can move a part of you I can never
hope to touch…Peter wants to pull you away. He wants to do it with this
first book, and then another. He doesn’t share our priorities, like a
family.” \(^\text{88}\)

Not only is Peter a friendship outside of their relationship that Jessica relies upon,
he is a representation of her autonomous desires, interests, goals. He is also as an external
eye that throws David’s excesses into doubt. Though Peter calls David “Mr. Perfect” as
gentle teasing for David’s devotedness, (teasing that Jessica herself interprets as envy), I
would suggest that the nickname is at least slightly sarcastic. Peter’s last words to Jessica,
“Mr. Perfect is a trip” suggest a level of incredulity at David’s gestures, a feeling that
there is something amiss. \(^\text{89}\) This doubt in David is echoed by others close to Jessica that
question the power dynamics of their relationship, his secrecy, his possessiveness. When
Jessica tells her mother of plans to move with David to Senegal, Bea warns her to protect
herself and Kira, “Bea had always seen through him, even when love made insight
impossible for Jessica.” \(^\text{90}\) It is Jessica’s sister Alex who is most consistent and forthright
in her criticism. She urges Jessica to resist David’s control, to maintain her own interests
and to write her book. \(^\text{91}\) Alex expresses frustration at Jessica’s continual wavering, “It
was like Jessica didn’t feel whole without that man. Sometimes, from the way she
interrogated Alex about her love life, Alex got the feeling her sister thought being single
was some kind of curse.” \(^\text{92}\)
Alex’s observations of Jessica confirm one of the reasons, beyond love, that Jessica remains in her controlling marriage. In the context of stigmatizing narratives of black femininity, Jessica values her role within a nuclear family. Every time she doubts her relationship with David, she also doubts her ability to have fulfillment and value without him. In this way, she falls prey to a culture of discipline that attempts to condition Black women’s behavior by constantly reminding them of their underachievement in establishing heteronormative nuclear families, “She’d met David before she began to worry about becoming an Unmarried Black Woman statistic, and he had never failed her.”93 Jessica pities her sister Alex for not having married, though Alex expresses great satisfaction with her life and concern with her sister’s prioritization of marriage as an achievement. In constantly comparing herself unfavorably to David, in wondering why he “chose” her, and in minimizing her other achievements in proportion to her achievement of nuclear family, Jessica seems to be frequently plagued by insecurity. I propose that this insecurity is largely shaped and influenced by sexism in both broader and black cultural politics. While the association of women’s value with ‘achieving’ heterosexual marriage is a problem that all women face, heterosexual black women face a deluge of semi-accurate statistics attesting to the rarity of ‘good black men’ and the excess of ‘single black women’. Within this environment (both the actual and illusory) of scarcity, they are socialized into black intra-racial discourses that, in response to histories of gendered and sexualized oppression, tend to encourage the ‘restoration’ of traditional gender norms. Jessica’s family support, education, and career free her from some of the material constraints that a woman like Dianthe would have faced at the turn
of the twentieth century, but her hesitance to question her relationship reflects the extent to the staying power of discourses around marriage and the heteronormative family in black political culture.

One scene in particular comically brings to light one powerful gender and sexual discourse circulating through print culture largely consumed by Black women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the DL phenomenon. I use the DL phenomenon to describe the alarm in black popular culture over “Down Low” brothers, Black men who have sex with men without identifying as gay or bisexual or disclosing their sexual behavior to female partners. David arrives home one day to find his old friend Mahmoud in his bedroom (shirtless and barefooted, playing a musical instrument). The two have a long history together; Mahmoud is the brother of David’s first wife Rana and the friend who brought him into Khaldun’s cult, who he traveled the world with for hundreds of years. But now Mahmoud has become increasingly devout to the cloistered world of Lalibela and has joined the Searchers, an order of men who retrieve Life Brothers who linger too long in the outside world. The old friends get into a passionate confrontation that Jessica walks in on and David is unable to satisfactorily explain:

She’d come home for lunch and found her husband arguing with a half-naked man in their bedroom, and his explanation—when she finally imagined to pull it out of him—was the lamest one she could imagine…Alex probably would have told her to pack up her bags and get an AIDS test, which wasn’t what she wanted to hear.94

In a sense this scene traffics in the Down Low (DL) phenomenon’s figuration of the black queer as vector of disease that reached hysterical levels following the release of J.L. King’s memoir/handbook on DL lifestyle.95 In another, it is heavy with the queer
possibility suggested by Lalibela’s closeted all-male world and Dawit and Mahmoud’s long friendship. Due declines to deepen and explore this possibility, refraining from suggesting any homoeroticism among the cloistered life brothers and containing queerness neatly within Peter’s unseen, unspoken private life. However distorted and homophobic the DL hysteria was, it did serve to point out that the spaces where Black women faced the most vulnerability to danger was within the very space they were encouraged to aspire to as a corrective to black community ills—heterosexual marriage. What DL discourse hinted at but often overlooked was that it was the very mandates of heteronormativity and demands of black masculinity that provided the conditions within which men in heterosexual marriages would have unprotected, undisclosed sex with men.

Even after this scene, though, Jessica is still in denial, accepting the second of David’s flimsy explanations, “She believed his story about Mahmoud. It wasn’t just wanting to believe, she told herself. She believed.”

Eventually, Jessica does realize the depth of David’s monstrosity, and, like Dianthe after discovering the full truth, finally resists. Jessica flees with their daughter, but David overtakes and proceeds to perform the Life Ritual upon them so they can join him as immortals. He successfully performs the Ritual on Jessica but is interrupted by the police before he can complete it upon Kira. Jessica has the opportunity to complete the ritual but does not, not wanting to exile Kira from Heaven. It stands to reason, if she would let her daughter die when she could have saved her, that she would not have chosen for them to join David—had he given her a choice.
Both Reuel and David were unwilling to contemplate the outcome of their wives’ autonomous choice. Both relied on deception to shift the power dynamics of their relationships in their favor, and conceived plans to ‘protect’ their wives that resulted in their deaths. Interestingly, both women experience some sort of resurrection. While Dianthe’s resurrection is limited to what some readers interpret as her spiritual movement to Tellessar and reincarnation as Queen Candace, Jessica awakens as an immortal. But as he has killed their child, David cannot now hope to remain in a relationship with her. He returns to Lalibela, but this Afrotopia is not an ideal society where he can find an alternative version of black femininity, and it cannot contain him. *My Soul to Keep* more critically interrogates Ethiopianism, depicting a character who willingly leaves the safety and the elevated humanity of the Afrotopia to experience the risk of human intimacy, and to remain connected to the diasporic blackness forged through the particular trauma of slavery, “The other Africans here shared my wounds…Just as I could never illustrate to any mortal all I have seen and felt in my lifetime, I could never expect my Life Brothers to understand all I have seen and felt here.”

David and Jessica briefly reconnect two years after Kira’s death when he goes to Sowetu, South Africa, to warn her about the growing visibility of her work. Jessica and her sister Alex, a hematologist, have started a mobile clinic to heal children with her now-immortal blood. This Jessica is different in more than just her new immortality. Confidently, quietly, she receives David like a queen receiving a supplicant, “Jessica’s was the third upstairs room, at the end of the hall. It was furnished sparsely with a white wicker bookshelf, a desk pushed beneath the window, and a wicker armchair, where
Jessica sat with her hands folded…David heard a meow, and Teacake settled himself in Jessica’s lap. A second pair of eyes stared at him.”

I see it as no coincidence that Jessica’s beloved cat, that David performed the Life Ritual upon before attempting it with Jessica and Kira, is named Teacake. Teacake is the name of Janie’s third husband in Zora Neale Hurston’s iconic Their Eyes Were Watching God. Though for most of their relationship Teacake is kind, charming, and playful, there is one curious scene where it is clear that he brutally beats her. Teacake’s abuse doesn’t seem to be subject to much critique in the text itself, and Janie clearly views her relationship with Teacake as ultimately positive and rewarding. In the scene that remarks upon the abuse she is penitent and silent. However, Janie’s move at the end of the novel to kill a violent and rabies-infected Teacake is a powerful act of self-preservation that moves her further on her journey of self-fulfillment. Her act to kill Teacake does not negate her love for him or the lessons and growth that that love occasioned in her life, but it does affirm her determination to survive, to choose herself. She returns to her home in peace, determined to live a life liberated from both the community’s expectations and masculine oppression.

I believe that in this small detail, the naming of the cat, Due intentionally aligns Janie and Jessica. Similar to Tea Cake and Janie, David and Jessica’s relationship enables Jessica’s evolution. But both women recognize the necessity to escape, to choose themselves. At the close of the novel Jessica is independent, self-sufficient, and filled with purpose. Rather than her constantly doubting what David would see in her, David is in awe of her, “You’ve never been more beautiful…And this…what you do here…I am
amazed.\textsuperscript{101} Jessica is not only now his equal, but greater, for she has exchanged her 
attachment to individual, heteronormative nuclear stability for a womanist mission of 
healing. Yet, the speculative element of Due’s text, the fact of immortality, offers an 
opportunity for reconciliation that Teacake and Janie could not have. If David is to 
engage Jessica now, it must be not as how he would imagine or control her, but as she is. 
Joining him, as he gently proposes at the end of their meeting, must be her choice; his 
only option is not to manipulate or compel her, but to wait.\textsuperscript{102}

Jessica and David’s brief reunion holds a different kind of utopian possibility, a 
possibility they can only access should he relinquish and redeem himself for his need for 
dominance, his exercise of violence, his hierarchical and casual relationship to human 
life. He also must grapple with and accept the change that Jessica, her sister, (and 
unbeknownst to him, the new, immortal daughter that Jessica was carrying at the time of 
the Life Ritual) promise to bring to the Life Brothers’ narrow project of hoarding a 
powerful tool for healing while they accumulate knowledge for themselves. Holding out 
the potential for Jessica and David’s reconciliation (which succeeding books in the series 
will fulfill), \textit{My Soul to Keep} does not dismiss black efforts of heterosexual family 
formation. But it does raise the importance of other kinds of familial affinity 
(relationships between friends, between men, between generations of women) and shows 
how inadequate gender, sexual, and familial reform are to the challenge of transforming 
the world.

Black science fiction, rather than aspiring to better futures, more often imagines 
underground parallel plots and societies in which Black people enact greater agency and
power than within the contemporary, above-ground world. Sometimes, these societies are also Afrotopias, imagined African (most particularly Ethiopian) civilizations untouched by the ravages of colonialism, technologically and intellectually advanced. Both written at the turn of centuries, *Of One Blood: The Hidden Self* and *My Soul to Keep* novels continue a specific tradition within the black fantastic while advancing their sociopolitical moment’s intra-racial discourses on blood, race, and gender. Both interrogate racial chattel slavery as a crucial site of the making of blackness primarily through the aural and through the violence enacted upon Black women’s bodies, and use the fantastic to bring into contact black subjectivities that would otherwise never meet: those from pre-racial, precolonial African civilizations, antebellum, and their respective contemporary, post-Reconstruction moments. And both show the struggle between black patriarchal desire and black feminine autonomy that is waged through the attempt to construct family both within and outside of the Afrotopian space. More heavily bound to the cyclical teleology of Ethiopianist thought of the Victorian era, *Of One Blood*’s critique of patriarchy exercised through ‘protection’ and its powerful use of the feminine and aural to explore the resonance of slavery falters in its excision of Dianthe’s soiled, miscegenated body from the narrative. By depicting a less ideal Afrotopia and a more sustained and transformative gendered struggle, *My Soul to Keep* extends and revises Afrotopian thought, demonstrating how crucial a recognition of the multidimensionality of blackness is to the project of imagining a better world.
Chapter Two
White Man’s Woman: Matriarchy Discourse and the Sci-fi Contemporary Narrative of Slavery

An international auction is being held. As Keri Washington watches, managing to look terrified, beautifully doe-eyed, confident, and alluring all at once, searching for a way to manipulate her captors with a now trademark fast-talking speech, computer monitors go into rapid activity, counting up the bids for the woman who can control the “leader of the free world.” In all this talk of buying and selling, what seems perhaps more incredulous than the prospect of such an auction is that the object up for bid is a Black woman, whose reason for value is romantic desire. For the thing that _Scandal_, Shonda Rhimes’ political soap opera about D.C. fixer Olivia Pope tries to emphasize—as much as it ever makes a point about Pope’s competence as a fixer, schemer, campaign manager, presidential advisor, almost as much as it tries to sell that in the midst of her lying and utter corruption that she is somehow a good person—is that the presidential affair that seems to return again and again as the story’s center is a love story. This is not rape or exploitation or abuse or any of those things we are used to thinking of in looking at white male against black female skin—this is supposed to be love. Most of the time, _Scandal_ seems to ignore the reality of institutional, structural, and cultural racism. Except for a couple of Sally Hemings’ jokes, Olivia Pope’s position as both political handmaiden and open lover to the president is rarely problematized. However, the auction storyline is a self-aware and obvious callout to the complicated history that makes such relationships, white-man-black-woman so blasphemous even as they seem to be currently
overrepresented in visual culture. As Spillers says, “Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived “pleasure” from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask.”

Scandal’s series of auction episodes, (in which Pope is kidnapped and auctioned off to world leaders and terrorist organizations seeking control over the President of the United States) might be seen as part of a family of texts that enter the slave past through contemporary female subjectivities, asking whether the relationships between owner and slave can ever be something like ‘love.’ This family also includes many of artist Kara Walker’s controversial silhouettes, that Arlene Keizer places alongside the work of black female writers who also represent troubling and complicated relationships between black women and the white master class. In the article, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” Keizer borrows and revises the concept “postmemory” from Holocaust studies to apply to the ways in which Black artists (who are generations removed from slavery and pursuing their interests in it from a position of less deference to the past) imagine the unrecoverable sexual subjectivities of slave women who must negotiate their identities and relationships to their bodies in the context of sexual domination. Keizer argues not for an investigation of actual slave women’s desire and sexual agency but for a consideration of the generative possibilities of these retrospective reimaginings for interrogations of the contemporary interracial relationships that they often stand in for.

What I find most interesting in this article is not Keizer’s claims about the actual content of Kara Walker’s artwork but her concept of “postmemory,” her articulation of
the ways in which contemporary narratives of slavery are concerned with not a recovery of enslaved Black women’s sexual subjectivities which remain irretrievable, but for their [contemporary authors] use of the terrain of slavery to explore contemporary relationships and subjectivities still informed, if not necessarily overdetermined, by histories of sexual violence and imbalances of power.\textsuperscript{105} Initially resistant to Keizer’s focus on slavery and sex with the master class as a site for reclaiming some kind of agential subjectivity and her privileging of contemporary white-man-black-woman relationships as a worthy site for interrogation, I had to confront my own hesitance to travel this ground. For me, the exploration of enslaved women’s agential subjectivity in the context of interracial sex walks dangerously close to narratives of black female collusion with slave masters which recrystallize in contemporary discourses of everything from African American women’s welfare dependency to their alleged disproportionate benefitting from affirmative action and tokenism at the expense of African American men. Understanding my own discomfort, I am interested in the ways in which the marking of the white male body as inappropriate for Black women’s desire exemplifies one of the ways in which the black female body has been particularly designated as the site of perpetuation and protection of “the race.” Marked this way, the discipline of the black female body continues to factor significantly into both the liberal and nationalist discourses of racial progress that frequently overlap, sometimes inextricably, in black social and political thought.

Postmemory challenges the idea of black female collusion, and audaciously runs against the grain of the polarizing tendencies in post Black Power movement readings of
slavery, reading practices in which there is no ground between total rebellion and total subjection. Objecting (rightfully so) to the images of happy slaves permeating popular culture and slave historiography through the 1960s, scholars and activists associated with the Black Power Movement called for and sought stories of resistance, particularly violent rebellion. Often focused on the figure of the male slave enacting revolution, this emphasis on revolution tended to dismiss a myriad of survival strategies and negotiations engaged in by enslaved men and women. Distinguishing between those who submitted to and resisted their condition, nationalist discourses of the era imbued the figure of the slave with a degree of shame. Figures such as “Uncle Tom” and “Mammy,” were renewed as symbols of those who assented in some form to white power, and were used, along with a rhetoric of feminization, to castigate Black leaders identified with the Civil Rights old guard. Like the nonviolent and integrationist strategies of civil rights liberalism, the slave was a personality, an old skin, to be shorn off as a more militant stance was declared.

There was, and continues to be, a need for studies of revolution. But I am interested in how this posture towards the ‘slave’ shapes black political discourse, particularly in terms of gender. The anti-slave posture often fixates on the emasculated Black man, cuckolded and robbed of his rightful place as the leader and protector of his family. For an example I wish to point to Dr. Joy Leary’s lecture, “The Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome,” the public educational arm of her book of the same title. While not wholly convinced by her claims that contemporary behavior in Black families is necessarily recognizable across Black families and can be directly attributed to the
trauma of slavery, I do find the lecture, in both the discussion prompted by these
suggestions and her engaging history of the construction of race to be a useful teaching
tool. Last year, in searching YouTube for video links to this lecture I stumbled on several
versions of it, some of which travelled into disturbing territory. Towards the end of one
lecture, she proposes the specific consequences of slavery’s trauma for black male and
female relationships, suggesting that if the anger which exists between Black men and
women is not confronted, it means, “the destruction of our families.” She states that
women were subjugated on one level, subjugated to “not trust their men, to rely only on
the master.” Citing the example of a scene from Sankofa, in which a Black male overseer
is forced to beat a runaway pregnant woman to death, she examines the consequences of
such “emasculaton” for black male psyche [rather than the pain and death of the woman
and the orphaning of her child]. In examining the rape of women, she focuses on the
impact of this rape upon the men and the male-female relationship, as the men wonder
about whether their wives acquiesced to or liked the master’s sex and the women wonder
why their men couldn’t protect them. While the lecture attempts to analyze the
intergenerational impact of slavery’s terrorism, it reproduces a narrative of male
emasculaton (and black female “soiling and disintegration”) that privileges the inability
of blacks under enslavement to inhabit patriarchal nuclear family space. In Black
women’s supposedly historically constructed “dependence” upon the white master, the
helpless raped woman becomes the willing concubine who bypasses the correct object of
her emotional and material dependence. Though Leary does not specifically reference the
state, I suggest that this “emasculaton” narrative participates in the conflation of the
“white man” with the white state, a conflation that sexualizes Black women’s relationships with the state in the context of redistributive social policy.

In this gendered discourse of the racial past, the figure of the emasculated male is cast against gross archetypes of enslaved women: the fat, asexual, hardworking for the white family, always laboring Mammy and sexual temptress Jezebel. While in black feminist critical practice these figures are often read as separate from another, with their own distinct characteristics, I depart from the study of singular archetypes to see how there is a consistency running through these images. Their physical depictions, level of sexuality and specific functions shift, yes, but overwhelmingly, particularly for black intraracial politics they overlap in one thing: a seeming proximity to white bodies and power that undermines the masculinity of Black men (and therefore, according to nationalist discourse, the integrity of the black family and community.) Mammy and Jezebel can be brought together under the discourse of matriarchy. Matriarchy discourse is the circulation of the idea that Black women’s excess, (whether in the form of too much attitude, too much independence, too much authority, too much sexuality, too much reliance upon the interventions of the state) displaces Black men from their rightful place as leaders, disrupts Black families, and produces community pathology. It also includes the idea that Black women have and continue to play a role in somehow betraying the community by ‘bringing down the Black man.’ During the Black Power era, this discourse of matriarchy had more than just enslavement to draw upon. Sociological studies of Black families had long been identifying their ‘matrifocal’ nature as the source of black community pathology when Crisis of the Negro Family, (more commonly
known as the Moynihan Report) was released in 1965. In this publication, liberal government official Daniel Moynihan (drawing heavily on earlier work of black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier) claimed that the dominance of Black women in the family was the foundation of Black people’s pathology and inability to fully take advantage of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. The report was and continues to be hotly debated, but it won enthusiastic support from liberals, racists, and nationalists alike. It particularly adhered to constructions of gender that were already taking shape in the discourse of Black Power advocates. According to Spillers, “Moynihan’s ‘Negro Family,’ then, borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person.”

Angela Davis also suggests the link between the figure of the black matriarch in the Moynihan Report and Black Power nationalism’s rememory of slavery, “Lingering beneath the notion of the black matriarch is an unspoken indictment of our female forbears as having actively assented to slavery.” In her landmark essay, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” she argues that the matriarch concept, (which means a woman-dominated power structure) is absolutely inapplicable to a slave system in which none of the enslaved, women least of all held power. The fact that a Black enslaved woman might be the only recognized parent of a slave child meant nothing in terms of her control over the child’s life; these relationships had no legal recognition or physical protection. But despite the violence that enslavement did to kinship connections and family life, Black women struggled to nurture a space for their
families away from the intrusions of the master. Without access to white bourgeois norms of gender, Black women and men in slavery exercised non-normative forms of labor, cooperation, and resistance.\textsuperscript{111} Though Davis’s essay perhaps overestimates the gender equality supposedly instituted within slave communities through enslaved people’s exclusion from traditional boundaries of gendered, it does important work to make the connection between matriarchy and slave discourse and destabilize ideas that Black enslaved women held inordinate power in relationship to white or Black men. Contrary to charges that slavery destroyed Black families by excluding them from patriarchal norms, Davis suggests that this exclusion provided for different negotiations of family responsibilities and labor.

In another landmark work, Hortense Spillers also references contemporary archetypes, (including Sapphire, a popular name for the ‘emasculating female’) of Black women as an entry point into her discussion of slavery’s engendering processes.\textsuperscript{112} While most analysis and reference to this essay focuses on its theory of the flesh, I am most drawn to her complex critique of matriarchy discourse that finds its source in the antebellum state. According to Spillers, the idea of Black women’s unhealthy domination has its source in American chattel slavery’s peculiar legality, which departed from traditional patriarchal law to assert that Black women’s children ‘belonged’ to them, while also ensuring that they had no real claim to them at all. This situation is particular to chattel slavery’s construction of blackness, which assigned free or unfree status based on the status of the of the mother. Therefore, in contemporary discussions such as the Moynihan Report, the black family’s lack of property (in this case cultural as well as
economic capital) is traced not to the fault of the male but of the “female line.” The Black male is held suspect because of his ‘castration,’ not only by the system but by the female, because of his Freudian overexposure to the Mother,

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the mother, handled by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve... the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated - the law of the Mother- only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law.\footnote{113}

The matriarch can be seen as the embodiment of this lingering ‘Law of the Mother.’ She became a sign, a spectre that continues to haunt black political discourse. It shows up in everything from conversations about affirmative action to welfare reform, from episodes of Judge Joe Brown to romantic comedies about strong, affluent, professional Black women who need to tone it down to make a man feel powerful enough to want them.\footnote{114} I am most concerned about how matriarchy discourse allows for, even provides for violence against women presumed to be undermining Black men through their alleged collusion with white media, white legal system, white power structure. In the context of life in racist, white-dominated state and society, women who must engage agencies of intervention for resources and protection, or who become visible to a media that panders to a white audience’s appetite for black pathology, are vulnerable to charges of being the ‘White Man’s Woman.’ The idea of the ‘White Man’s Woman’ is one manifestation of matriarchy discourse that is often used to quell Black women’s claims for autonomy, resources, or protection from violence.
Matriarchy discourse was a connecting thread between the The Million Man March and welfare reform debate of 1994. The Million Man March has been an object of intense criticism by Black feminists for its masculinist focus and prioritization of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family as the basic site of black community progress. I believe that some of this criticism has ignored the diverse and complex motivations and political perspectives among individual men who participated in the March, but I am interested in the way in which matriarchy discourse, personified by the idea of ‘White Man’s Woman’ was a subtextual presence in the March’s ideology. It can be seen within the Welfare Queen discourse that helped to gather support around both the welfare reform legislation of 1994 and the Million Man March that happened a few miles from the site of welfare reform debates. Both legislators who wrote policies such as paternafare (which connected TANF to child support payments) and the Million Man March activists (which called for Black men’s restoration to the rightful heads of their families) demanded that poor Black women’s dependence be redirected from the ‘White Man’ to the ‘Black Man’ (who represent the white and black nations, respectively). Ange-Marie Hancock notes the connection between welfare reform and the Million Man March in her study of what she calls “the politics of disgust” surrounding black welfare mothers, “Neither intervention—the Million Man March nor the New Jersey “family cap”—has alleviated single, poor African American women’s poverty.” Middle class Black women are also vulnerable to being cast as the White Man’s woman as well through a circulation of discourses positing that African American women benefit unfairly from affirmative action and that
their advancements in educational attainments, career, and income come at the expense of African American men.116

This chapter attempts to trace the root of ‘White Man’s Woman,’ a particular manifestation of matriarchy discourse. I follow the suggestions of both Hortense Spillers and Angela Davis in arguing that the seed for this discourse is in enslavement’s denial of patriarchal rights to Black men and bodily integrity to Black women. Observing a connection between ideas of black matriarchy and Black Power era conceptions of the slave, I argue that the Black Power moment gendered the racial past in a way that renders black femininity as particularly suspect. This remains powerful in contemporary black political culture, where Black women are called upon to prove their willingness to uphold black masculinity—often through the sacrifice of their own voices, safety, needs. I begin with an analysis of the 1994 film *Sankofa*, a speculative narrative of slavery that powerfully represents nationalism’s gendering of the racial past. To me, speculative literature and culture is a particularly apt site in which to explore black political discourse and thought, because it demonstrates what might be possible, and what limitations remain in place, if one is willing to think beyond the boundaries of the accepted and verifiable ‘real.’ The contemporary narrative of slavery is in its way always inherently speculative, as it revisits the site of enslavement to construct subjectivities that are unrecoverable. But the speculative contemporary narrative of slavery makes even more possible, by allowing for manipulations of time and dimensions that can bring contemporary and antebellum subjectivities in direct contact with one another, without the constraints of traditional historical fiction. Turning to Black women’s speculative fiction, I look at how authors
use the speculative contemporary narrative of slavery to revise a matriarchy discourse that denies complexity to Black women involved in intimate entanglements with the master class—a denial that also condemns contemporary Black women who are taken up within this discourse.

As an undergraduate student studying abroad in Ghana, West Africa, on a trip that was designed as a “return home” for Black students, I was introduced to the powerful Haile Gerima film *Sankofa*. A beautiful film often used pedagogically in Africana/Black Studies courses, *Sankofa* tells the story of a slave uprising through the experience of a [contemporary] woman sent into the past. Haile Gerima spent twenty years researching, writing, and producing the film, conceiving of the idea in the early seventies, during the Black Power Movement but finally released it in 1994, after his graduation from film school and the rise of academic Afrocentric studies. This trajectory places the film’s emphasis at the meeting points of the Black Arts Movement, which sought to produce politically conscious work that articulated a specifically ‘Black’ perspective; Third Cinema, a global movement which sought to decolonize film; and the New Black Cinema, a movement of independent, institutionally trained Black filmmakers who saw themselves acting in opposition to the imperatives of mainstream Hollywood.117 Like many cultural works in African diasporic culture, *Sankofa* challenges the categorizations of realist/historical versus science fiction or fantasy. The film’s logics are informed by traditional African religions, in which objects and actions can be manipulated to control forces in the unseen world, which then have a corresponding effect on the material world. The ‘fantastic’ things that happen in *Sankofa*: a woman being sent to the past, a headman
(slave empowered to supervise and discipline other slaves) being incapacitated by the wills of watching slaves, a man being driven first to lust then madness by a love potion in his food, are all things that the film, and the African and African-descended characters that populate the film, take for granted as completely real. However, the reading of *Sankofa* as strictly a historical or slavery film denies its potential to be read as a speculative text, alongside other speculative texts. I read *Sankofa* against the speculative neo-slave narratives of Black women writers to elucidate their different approaches to representing black womanhood and histories of domination. *Sankofa* reflects the kinds of understandings of history, gender, and slavery that I have been describing, understandings that I find particularly associated with Black Power era and contemporary nationalism,

*Sankofa* is exemplary of common-sense black nationalism’s negotiations with what it considers to be versions of “black femininity”; it dramatizes the violence with which common-sense black nationalism tends to confront black femininity, and it provides a set of images through which to explore the ways common-sense black nationalism secures consent to dominant conceptualizations of gender and sexuality and thus to the forms of domination and exploitation these conceptualizations rationalize.\(^{118}\)

The central character of *Sankofa* is Mona (she shortly becomes Shola for most of the duration of the film), a [contemporary] model participating in a photo shoot in Ghana, West Africa. The opening scenes of the film feature Mona, in leopard print and an awful blond wig, cavorting and posing, in what seem to be exaggerated and animalistic ways, for a white photographer who utters suggestive prompts. She rolls around on the beach and twirls around the dungeons (called castles by the people above ground) where Africans awaiting transport through the Middle Passage were once held, as white
American tourists chatter excitedly and take pictures in the background. Like the tourists, we are clearly supposed to read Mona as disrespectful and exploitative of a sacred space. Both the tourists and Mona are verbally accosted by an elder named Sankofa. The character and role of Sankofa have little subtlety: his name translates into an Akan proverb that means “Go back and fetch it,” (return to your past in order to move into your future), and he carries a cane with a bird with its head turned backwards (one of the Adrinka symbols that correspond to this West African proverb]. The white tourists Sankofa simply shoos away. But he focuses on Mona individually, pointing his cane at her and castigating her to, “Go back to your past.” Wandering around afterwards in the dungeons, Mona becomes trapped below and suddenly transported to the past, where she is stripped, branded, and sent across the ocean to experience life as Shola, an enslaved woman on the Lafayette plantation in the Americas. We shortly see Shola being brutally raped by her owner. The parallel between the white photographer and the slave owner are clear. Message: you were being raped then and are still getting raped now. We are clearly supposed to see Mona as unenlightened and exploited, unaware of her own shame until her actions are placed in historical context of the sexual violence against Black women. The slaveowner’s penis is rendered equivalent to the photographer’s lens.

Most of the characters in Sankofa serve as types through which to read the experience of enslavement and the contemporary subjectivities that enslavement produced. (I have seen and have myself, earlier in my teaching career, deployed this method of reading the film) There is Shola, the house slave who is comfortable in her subjection and afraid to speak up and resist (although Shola is not depicted as a traitor or
sell out, as house slaves often are in house/field rhetoric. She defies that kind of rhetoric, by providing resources to the community, comforting Lucy, and sneaking food to Shongo.) Shola is not marked as a traitor, but she is afraid and apathetic, frequently saying things such as, “It ain’t none of your business.” She is the depicted as likeable though fearful, because she is the character that the modern audience is supposed to identify with, enter the narrative through, and, in Shola’s perspective, experience enlightenment and transformation. There is Shongo, the rebel, the leader, the quintessential man. We are not allowed to see Shongo submit (he is shot, he is beaten, he is contained, but he is never seen actually acquiescing). Nunu is the metaphor for Africa, a representation of the African cultural past and identity that contemporary African Americans must recover, that Joe, the most distasteful character kills. Joe is the polluted, stained, sellout, the impure one mixed with white blood and disconnected from the community. He kills his past and therefore, as Shola tells him, “has no future.” Noble is the headman, who, working closely with the overseers, advances himself by keeping other Black folks down. So if we read Sankofa as representing a range of modern-day types of Black folks that the pedagogical use of the film seeks to discipline, then Mona as an exploited model in the opening scenes is supposed to represent all Black women who subject themselves to sexualization in visual culture. This black nationalist distaste for Black women’s participation in popular visual culture is similar to what Jennifer Nash calls black feminism’s “protectionist” theory of representation, in which visual culture is always a site of injury from which Black women’s bodies must be rescued and recovered.
Through *Sankofa* we see Shola mature from an unenlightened, fearful slave into a rebellious, empowered African woman. She is educated by Nunu, the representation of Africa, and emboldened by her lover Shongo, the representation of strong, rebellious manhood. After a series of events, including Joe’s murder of Nunu and Shola’s attempted escape and initiation into African traditional practice, her master again attempts to rape her. She fights back, kills him with a machete, and joins the escape to the maroon encampment in the hills that Shongo had been planning. Shola’s fate is uncertain, as the last narration of her experience tells us that she kept running until she flew. We can probably assume that she was killed during her escape, but her story of flying away from the plantation sounds like folktales about Africans who flew back to Africa, a prominent story in African American oral culture. Still in Shola’s subjectivity, we as film viewers are taken on this literal or spiritual flight across the waters and back to present-day Ghana, where Shola, now Mona again, emerges from the dungeons naked and wailing, to be embraced and clothed by singing Ghanaian women. Demurely wrapped, she ignores the white photographer she posed for earlier and takes her seat at the feet of Sankofa, where other African diasporans sit and watch him drum and chant. She is disciplined, respectful, and properly educated about her history and her rightful behavior as an African woman.

There are many things to be admired about this film. An independent cinematic achievement, it contests the representations of happy slaves in popular culture and the lack of attention to women in new slave historiography. Shola, Nunu, and Kuta, the young pregnant woman whipped to death because of her escape attempt, all feature as
figures of resistance, central to the narrative. Shola’s sexual subjugation is pictured without much emphasis on how this subjugation ‘emasculates’ Shongo. Interestingly, the film resists the urge to fully restore Shongo through a vengeful defense of Shola’s honor. There is one scene where it appears that Shongo is witnessing or hearing her rape from the stocks and attempting to free himself to defend her. But conveniently, he is restrained and cannot actually exercise this violence, which would certainly cause him to be killed before he could fulfill his remaining role in the narrative. It is interesting that Shongo is shown attempting to save Kuta, but not the woman he loves. Shola even asks him at one point, “You ever think about taking me away from here?”

Perhaps in not addressing Shongo’s knowledge of or feelings about Shola’s rape the film is attempting to preserve his manhood. In resisting the urge to have Shongo enact the retributive violence, does the film make an admirable move to center womanhood rather than manhood, so often the focus of Black nationalist narratives? Or is Shola’s enactment of her own retributive violence part of the film’s disciplinary functions? Keeling suggests that the film individuates the trauma of and the responsibility for rape, and places the onus on Shola for not only her own self-defense, but for her experience of this violence in the first place. Shola before and after her education by Nunu and initiation into an African spiritual community is similar to Mona before and after her experience in the past; it is only after this education that Mona rejects the photographer, Shola kills the slave master. However, this suggests that (just as the uneducated, unenlightened Mona had the power to resist the exploitative lens of the white photographer) the uneducated, unenlightened Shola had the power to prevent the violence
against her in the first place, but was unwilling to because of her less conscious mental state, “until she (finally) fights back to put an end to feminizing violence, she tolerates rather than resists being raped.”\textsuperscript{121} This brings to mind Angela Davis’s contention that contemporary matriarchy discourse (and the contemporary Mona, as an object of the white male photographer, would fall into this discourse) has its roots in the suspicion that Black women, historically, assented to their sexual exploitation during slavery.

Though Gerima’s choice of so many strong female characters might be applauded, this choice of a woman to anchor Sankofa’s narrative might not be as progressive as it initially appears. By selecting a sexualized fashion model to undergo this particular journey into the past, the film still manipulates and disciplines the black female body as it calls upon a simplistic binary between resistance and submission. Mona/Shola acts as an avatar for the submissive contemporary Afro-diasporan that does not understand their history. One moment that makes this abundantly clear is the moment when Shola gets trapped in the dungeon and first begins to make her journey into the past, and screams, “I am not an African, I am not an African!” This exclamation makes me think of my experiences in teaching this film and watching it be taught in Africana Studies courses that were, at the time I began teaching, predominantly Black. We were encouraged to push Black students to see themselves as “African,” not “just Black,” because of our understanding that Black was just one nation’s minority group while African was a politicized, global identity. In \textit{Sankofa} the film audience, that is assumed to be unaware of their true African past and identity, is gendered as feminine, occupying the position of slaves that must be reeducated, de-gendered, and de-feminized in order to
become human again. Perhaps a woman is chosen as the central character in Sankofa out of a desire to reinsert Black women into the history of slave resistance, but she also functions as a body that is particularly apt for the film’s disciplining logics, logics that seek to produce a properly ‘conscious’ subject. This consciousness is a state that is often performed through the claiming of an African identity and ascription to the versions of African cultural beliefs and practice often found in the work of scholars such as Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga (the founder of Kwanzaa).

When I taught Africana Studies, one reason for emphasizing the Africanity of Blacks was the idea that a unified identity must precede unified political action. Gerima clearly created Sankofa out of a political imperative. But the uncomplicated adoption of an African identity and subdued deference to ‘tradition,’ ‘history,’ ‘elders,’ and ‘the past,” does not necessarily compel political activity in the interest of African and Afro-diasporan liberation. To the contrary, cultural nationalism has often been an apolitical practice, which attempts to reconstruct an edited version of African life and cultural practice for displaced Afro-descendants, emphasizing pride, celebration, and restoration of allegedly precolonial African ways of life. Cultural nationalist discourses, by imagining an African past in which the family was stable, balanced, and whole, have consistently demanded some form of submission or deferral, casting a suspicious eye on women’s independence and autonomy. Anger towards Black women’s exercise of autonomy carries with it a language of historical reference, a residue of a racial past in which the denial of patriarchal privilege to Black men allegedly incurred Black women’s inordinate independence.
I have no objection in itself to stories of rebellion and resistance. I critique Sankofa not to demean the film’s accomplishment or significance, but to give a visual example of the kinds of discourses that have become dominant in post Black Power conceptions of slavery and gender. I especially have no argument with the film’s imperative to, “Go back to your past.” I only wonder whether going back to the past to only recover stories of straightforward resistance does a disservice to the complex, so peculiarly pressured lives that our enslaved ancestors lived, and that African-descended people continue to find themselves living today. I wonder if the representation of dis-enlightenment and enlightenment through the narrative of a woman sexually subjected by her master helps to reinforce the circulation of narratives of Black female collusion today. According to Keeling, “In order to unfold a Black human consciousness, Sankofa must deny the humanity of the slave as a slave (if there is such a thing) and ignore the aspects of slave common sense that continue to inform black common sense…” If the common sense of oppressed and exploited groups is, as Gramsci suggests, a record of the groups’ survival, then it is clear that the black common sense that enabled survival during slavery contained nodes of consent to slavery.” Keeling captures my concerns about how narratives like Sankofa represent the slave past as a site of pollution rather than part of the forging of contemporary African American subjectivities and in many cases our readings are alike. However, I do not necessarily believe that enslaved people that did not violently rebel or escape necessarily assented either. I think it is possible to be defeated, to be compelled, to be forced, but to also exercise the interior power to withhold consent.
I also wonder if Keeling’s reading perhaps proves itself wrong, in arguing against a reading of the slave past that would render the lives of those who did not risk death to rebel useless, but also claiming that nodes of survival that required consent are present in black subjectivities today. This might suggest that Sankofa’s project, that seeks to expunge the submissive slave from the past in order to have braver, stronger, more rebellious Afro diasporans in the present [“it posits that those who did not risk death, those who survived as slaves, must be expunged in the process of unfolding the collective African the film presents as adequate to the present need for liberation.”125] has merit. Someone might say that, “yes, we are descended from those that were afraid, those that did not fight, those that survived, which is why we are not fighting a more robust battle for liberation today.” I am interested in resisting such an interpretation by calling attention not to “nodes of assent” to the dominations of slavery, but to what the experience of coercion, violence, exclusion from normative family structures might have provided for that we can use today.

The radical humanist theory of Sylvia Wynter might be useful in thinking through this, this alternative inheritance of enslavement. Wynter both interrogates and broadens humanism by distinguishing human as a species inclusive of all humans from Man, a genre of human limited to the white bourgeois Western male human which centered and dominated the humanist discourse of the Enlightenment.126 If, as Wynter claims, Man is not all humans but the liberal masculine bourgeois subject that enslaved Africans were excluded from, then the survival strategies of the enslaved were always constructing alternative conceptions of humanity. Therefore, black humanity and black humanism
cannot be epitomized solely by the struggle to be recognized as human under its normative construction. We can look at practices in African American culture such as flexible family formation (including higher flexibility in gender labor and roles, extended kin networks, and the ability for families to absorb and care for non-blood members); communal sharing strategies (of information, goods, skills, and resources) and a variety of other tools of coping and survival that run counter to the kind of liberal subject and family formation that normative humanism compels and contemporary black politics embrace. According to Keeling, “In order to move forward, Sankofa ignores the possible alternatives for and of “the human” that exist in both its slaves and its audience’s present perception. Instead of directing the spectators’ attention towards those alternative conceptions, Sankofa chooses to pursue a black humanity that relies upon rendering the slaves inhuman.”  

The Black Power moment reading of “the slave” as inhuman can also be looked at in conversation with Alexander Weheliye’s critique of bare life discourse. Giorgio Agamben (not the only but possibly the most notable proponent of this theory) defined bare life as that which exists at the level of pure biological existence, with no meaning or performance outside of the space it currently occupies, at the complete discretion of the judicial actors (officers in Nazi death camps) who may consider this life outside the boundaries of humanity. Drawing on the radical humanisms of scholars such as Sylvia Wynter and Frantz Fanon, as well as black feminist critical theory, Weheliye looks at the possibilities for humanity, and even liberation, in the sites and bodies most excluded from the Western conception of the human. Questioning why the European death camps,
(rather than the long histories of violent subjugation of peoples of color throughout the world by colonization, genocide, and enslavement) come to stand as the ultimate examples of human subjection, he proposes that even these projects of discipline and brutalization are never wholly successful at eviscerating humanity. For example, Weheliye’s compelling re-reading of Agamben’s and other critics’ analysis of the Muselmann (the figure representing people in death camps starved beyond the point of, supposedly, human behavior and recognition) shows how Agamben’s rendering of the Muselmann as the farthest boundary of humanity, the most extreme example of bare life, necessitated the forceful neglect of personal accounts in which Muselmaners showed themselves to be still desiring, active beings, dreaming of food and freedom and enacting their will to survive. Importantly, Weheliye is careful to avoid the loaded language of agency and resistance, pointing out how these concepts assume coherent subjects and distinct oppositions and silence other, less obvious forms of disruption of power. We can look at Sankofa’s rendering of the seer slaves, silent, watching, will and forceless creatures, as similar to Agamben’s fixture of the Muselmann as the most degraded figure of mankind. So if, as Weheliye says, there are other inner worlds and possibilities for the Muselmann, so these must also exist for the slave.

In contrast to the reading of slave personhood made so visually powerful by the film Sankofa, Arlene Keizer takes up texts that trouble such binary or straightforward postures towards the slave past. She uses the phrase “contemporary narrative of slavery” to reference a broader range of African American and Afro-Caribbean works that use slavery as a site to explore contemporary black identity. Though the time period through
which she traces the emergence of this literary genre coincides with the height of the Black Power era, the works contest the kinds of postures towards slavery found in a great deal of Black Power rhetoric and in historiography of slavery from the era. Keizer argues that the contemporary narrative of slavery contests a teleological narration of the ‘Black community’ as moving ‘up from slavery’ to the destination of black middle class life. Or, I would say, specifically in relation to Black Power rhetoric, moving away from the subjected position of slave to the manly one of defiant self-determination. It often problematizes resistance and questions the dominant positive reading of the figure of the rebellious slave, “contemporary African American and Caribbean writers have begun to treat resistance as a variety of strategies that come with their own problems, rather than as a straightforward solution. Furthermore, contemporary narratives of slavery consistently question the equation of overt resistance with black subjectivity.” There is a self-interest in these postmemoric writings of slavery,

Yet these fiction writers seem to be telling us that denying the possibility of such agency to enslaved and recently freed constrains our own sense of agency in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These texts seem to be saying that we need to imagine those ancestors as psychically free if we are to imagine ourselves as psychically free...These narratives are very clearly attempting to re-imagine the past for the benefit of the present and future, regardless of the dismal realities that may have made these fictional identities virtually impossible.

I do not share either Keizer’s apparent doubt that enslaved people’s subjectivities could have possibly been as complex as the contemporary narrative of slavery represent them, or the belief that these texts are only about complicating black identities historically and contemporarily so that subjects today can enjoy more freedom to be themselves. While I have no objection to the expansion of such freedom, I think that the
kind of freedom that a film like *Sankofa* articulates, which is a collective and spiritual freedom, requires a more powerful response if *Sankofa*'s methods and representations are to be subjected to critique. What I mean is, Black Power era figurings of the slave were at least in the interest of some kind of freedom, social justice, betterment of collective black life. So I cannot help but feel that a critique of such narratives must argue for more than the individual freedom to be our more complicated selves.

My concern is not with individual freedom to be, but with the macro political uses of binary readings of slave resistance and subjection, particularly the discourse around matriarchy and Black female collusion. For the contemporary reiterations of this discourse have had, and continue to have ramifications that are damaging on individual and collective levels. In her political science study of nationalism in contemporary African American politics, Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd identifies a recurrent theme of the black-woman-as-traitor syndrome, a tradition of black political discourse which vociferously highlights both Black women’s roles in highly visible spectacles of black male criminality and their seemingly wrongheaded attempts to assert their own advancement at the black male’s, therefore the black community’s expense. Images of a monolithic black community void of sexual difference is often invoked in censuring Black women who speak out against Black men, while the community ignores abuse committed against these women by men in its prioritization of race, “The Black race, seen as a communal grouping with shared interests, enemies, and identity, is depicted as an actor moving through history toward a victorious future.”  

Alexander-Floyd focuses on examples of this phenomenon in the defense of men and villainization of women in
the following situations: Marion Barry’s arrest in sting operation participated in by Rasheeda Moore, Barry Reynold’s trial for statutory rape of Beverly Heard, and reaction to Carol Moseley-Braun’s candidacy for Democratic party presidential nomination against Al Sharpton. A number of other situations in which African American community support seems to be thrown behind Black men while Black women are viewed with derisive suspicion include the support shown to Mike Tyson following conviction for the rape of Desiree Washington, the treatment of Anita Hill during Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearings, and, much more recently, the social media and public uproar accusing intimate partner violence victims Rihanna and Janay Rice of somehow instigating their partners’ attacks.

So what do these contemporary eruptions of the black-woman-as-traitor theme in black social consciousness have to do with slavery, white men, and sex? I wish to suggest that such matriarchy discourse plays a significant role in policing safe directions for black female desire. The desire that I speak of is not only the desire for a partner that might be, according to nationalist logics, the wrong race or gender, but Black women’s desire for anything that might be seen as coming at the expense of Black men: jobs, political position, recognition for labor, redress for violence, resources for survival. While matriarchy does not always specifically involve sex or white men, it is a discourse that is easily sexualized, just as the power which Black women are accused of pandering to is easily embodied. The white male body is also a spectre, one that can stand in for whatever Black women supposedly access in exchange for their sacrifice of Black men (the figure of which stands in for the entire community): money, power, media attention.
In this light, the maintenance of a perceived distance between black female and white male bodies is a coping mechanism that serves to shield Black women, purportedly, from a white gaze that has historically exoticized and violated them. But perhaps more importantly, this distance shields them from accusations of undue dependence on and collusion with the white men that must place them at odds with black manhood and, therefore, the black community. To maintain this distance, a Black woman’s unbridled choice of a white man tends to be read through a prism of historical subjection—a reading that often simplifies and distorts the black slave woman’s role in that subjection. It is difficult to confront the figure of whitemanblackwoman outside of the polar figures of either the raped or resisting slave woman, because of the ways in which antebellum narratives of seduction have been reinscribed into intraracial narratives of black female-assisted constraints of black masculinity. Looking at the way in which 19th century law and literature worked in tandem to render black female bodies as “unrapeable,” Saidiya V. Hartman describes how a discourse of seduction displaced culpability for the sexual violence of enslavement, both in the law and in, ironically, abolitionist literature,

The discourse of seduction enabled those disgusted and enraged by the sexual arrangements of slavery, like Mary Boykin Chestnut, to target slave women as agents of their husbands’ downfall…The sexual exploitation of the enslaved female, incredulously, served as evidence of her collusion with the master class and as evidence of her power, the power to both render the master weak and, implicitly, to be the mistress of her own subjection.135

This framing of enslaved women as “powerful” over their owners, and as mistresses of their own subjection, is echoed in nationalist discourses and imagery. Even
though Shola’s entanglement with her master is depicted, rightfully, as a violent rape, the arc of the story—which places her final confrontation with the master at the zenith of her development into a true and proud ‘African’—suggests that she is, in her unenlightened state, somehow culpable for this violence. If a clear victim of violent rape can be read as culpable through discourses of both antebellum narratives and nationalist memory, what then, are we to make, of relationships of long term concubinage, in which both the depiction of violent force and the final, resisting confrontation are withheld? It is precisely these kinds of relationships—long term unions producing children, which might suggest levels of consent and even affection—that Black female writers of contemporary narratives of slavery frequently take on.

Turning back to literature, and taking seriously Keizer’s proposal that the contemporary narrative of slavery is a way of working through the complexities of contemporary relationships, I’d like to respond to Sankofa’s logics with another story of time travel and enslavement. If the contemporary narrative of slavery can be read as an interrogation of contemporary erotic life, then how might it upset contemporary political attachments to policing black female desire? How does Octavia Butler’s postmemoric writings in Kindred play with and revise matriarchy discourse, and damage its ability to shame Black women who seek the range of choices more unquestionably available to men? To pursue this question, I take on Octavia Butler’s famous Afro-futurist fantasy Kindred, which uses elements of fantasy and realism to query the complexities of long-term concubinage in slavery.
Emerging in the late 1970s, *Kindred* belongs to several literary families: the explosion of Black women’s writing in the 1970s and 1980s that bridged the Black Arts and Women’s Liberation Movements, the growing genre of the contemporary narrative of slavery, and the developing canon of American science fiction—despite Butler’s own fervent denial that the book should be considered science fiction. In *Kindred*, there is no alternative world built, and the device or means by which her protagonist travels back in time is never explained. Butler describes it as a work of fiction touched by the fantastic just enough to allow her to pursue a narrative idea, “*Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There’s no science in Kindred.”  

*Kindred* upsets the kinds of strict genre boundaries which can inhibit work in and outside of the science fiction or black literary canon from being read both in the context of its engagements with race and with the fantastic. The speculative element, time travel bringing a twentieth century subjectivity in contact with the past, creates the potential for agency or power that threatens to both upset and reinforce the imbalance of power between white men and Black women. The power of the fantastic stands in for the imagined power ascribed to Black women by the discourses of seduction and matriarchy. As this text allow us to imagine that antebellum Black women had some kind of inordinate power, what can they tell us about its limits, its impact upon the violent arrangements of the chattel slavery system, and the interiority of those that wield it?

Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* was published in 1979. Though this is a fourteen-year difference from the release of Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*, the aforementioned trajectory of Gerima’s work, which locates the inception of the film in the 1970s, actually indicates a
shared sociocultural context—the logics of the Black Power and Black Arts Movement. Both are heavily informed by Black Power and Black Arts era readings of ‘the slave’ and consciously engage these readings, albeit, in very different ways. Gerima, reacting against Hollywood’s common portrayals of enslaved people as buffoonish, servile, and happy, aligned himself with the Black Power imperative to prioritize resistance. In contrast, Butler’s *Kindred* is critical of this imperative. Her entire canon of work is concerned with the complexity of power relations; her stories frequently feature struggles between people and more powerful beings in which no clear agency or resistance is allowed. *Kindred*, specifically, was a response to Black Power discourses concerning servitude and subjection:

*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery.\(^{137}\)

In this same interview Butler discusses the life of her mother, who grew up on a sugar plantation, noting the similarity between the conditions of sharecropping and slavery. The kinds of rhetoric that she describes and positions *Kindred* against, a rhetoric that reviles domestic servants and earlier generations of Black people for their alleged passivity, a rhetoric that she also hints (in using her mother as an example and in her obvious focus on black femininity in *Kindred*) is gendered, is precisely that which I have described as matriarchy discourse and the related Black power figuring of the slave. Unlike *Sankofa*, in which the return to the past is a cleansing from which Shola returns intact, in *Kindred* it is a messy, bloody, tangled journey that one cannot come back from with any easy answers, or with clean hands.
The present day story of *Kindred* is set in 1976, the year of the nation’s bicentennial. The Black female protagonist, Dana, is a writer married to a white man, Kevin and living in Pasadena, CA. Through a vehicle that is never explained, she suddenly begins to disappear in the present-day world, traveling back to the Weylin plantation where her ancestors are enslaved, beginning in 1813. As in the majority of these time jumps she arrives to find Rufus Weylin, a white paternal ancestor and the eventual owner of the Weylin plantation in danger, she presumes that he is calling her back in time to save him until he fathers her grandmother Hagar. While during her time jumps only minutes or hours pass in 1976, the alternate time of the Weylin plantation moves far more quickly. Over the course of Dana’s experience with time travel (less than a week in the present), she is able to observe (and influence) the childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of her direct ancestors, Rufus and Alice, the Black woman who is first childhood friend, and then enslaved concubine to Rufus.

There is one obvious reason why Butler may have chosen the nation’s centennial as a significant date, the date Dana finally concludes her journeys; 1976 is around the time of *Kindred*’s completion and publication. But the nation’s centennial is also an ironic choice. It reminds us that in the midst of the celebrations of the United States’ two hundred years of existence as a nation, there are many stories of human exploitation and suffering. Any anniversary of a nation recalls its founding myths, but America’s founding myths, narratives that center on slogans such as “Give me Liberty or Give me Death!” and colorful images of tea parties and rockets, belie the institution that both made independence possible and that (despite regional debates and the obvious moral
quandaries) was written firmly and perpetually into the founding documents. This reminds us that the very conditions of possibility for the U.S. to exist are those that Dana witnesses in the past, the violence upon Black people, the theft of their labor, and the construction of Black women’s bodies as the site of reproduction of this labor force. This institution also was actively practiced by many of the so-called founding fathers, most notably Thomas Jefferson, a central architect of U.S. democracy. His long-term liaison with slave Sally Hemings has become the stuff of rumor, legend, lawsuits, romance novels, and TV movies. This historical open secret has inspired neo-slave narrative-style fiction since the nineteenth century, with works such as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel: or, the President’s Daughter*, and the more contemporary Barbara Chase Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* and *The President’s Daughter*. A long term concubinage that resulted in many children, the Jefferson-Hemings story has been something of a fixation by writers of neo-slave narratives seeking to construct the impossible to know subjectivity of an enslaved woman subjected not to a singular rape, but long-term, (and perhaps status and privilege incurring) entanglement with a powerful white man. By referencing the nation’s centennial Butler does a callout to this Jeffersonian drama.

In Butler’s contemporary pairing of a white man and Black woman, she sets up a similar kind of visual pairing as *Sankofa*; in both representations, we see the present day Black female character in juxtaposition to a white man with which she is intimately involved. For Mona, this is the white photographer, for Dana it is her husband, Kevin. The relationships are very different; the photographer in *Sankofa* is a flat, one dimensional figure who stands in for the violence of the white gaze (and the pollution of
capitalist visual culture, particularly for Black women), and Kevin is a fully fleshed out character, in a conjugal relationship with the protagonist, and he transforms throughout the story. However, there is not-so-subtle hinting at a similar power imbalance and exploitation in both pairings. In the opening scene Dana is unpacking and mentions how Kevin shirks the work, allowing her to perform much of the labor, “We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order.”¹⁴⁰ This might seem a small and insignificant detail, a mild complaint about a lazy and self-centered husband, but Kevin’s ease with allowing or even pressuring Dana to perform labor for him is one that comes up again in the novel, in their present day story and in the past. However, though Butler hints at exploitation, she portrays the relationship between a white man and Black woman as complex and dynamic, rather than simplistic and static.

Still, why the choice to marry Dana to a white man in the present day? What purpose does this serve in the narrative and in Butler’s political impetus? Keizer suggests that the interest in historical relationships between white men and Black women is related to readings of such relationships today.¹⁴¹ In this evaluation, Butler’s nods to power imbalance and exploitation in Dana and Kevin’s relationship admit that such relationships are not without their unique challenges. Interracial couples not only operate in the shadow of historical racialized violence, that violence is inextricably wrapped up in their erotic life. As Butler said, “I gave her that husband to complicate her life.”¹⁴² However, I have said before that there must be a reason beyond a mirroring of present day complexity for the existence and continued reproduction of the contemporary
narrative of slavery. For Butler, power and black political discourse are recurring preoccupations. One can surmise that Butler, someone highly critical of Black Power discourses regarding subjection and resistance, might also be highly suspicious of discourses of racial purity. Indeed, her fiction often prominently features hybrid characters. These hybrids are usually a blend of human and alien or human and superhuman creatures, but in *Kindred*, one of her most realistic novels, the best form of hybridity available is that between races. She uses this hybridity, from the perspective of her Black female protagonist, to problematize Black Power discourses of racial purity and authenticity that particularly located the responsibility for national belonging and reproduction with women. The current day marriage between Dana and Kevin does not play out to the script laid out by *Sankofa* (in which the enlightened, properly disciplined African woman walks away from the exploitative white man), but neither does it escape the trauma of racialized history.

Dana and Kevin accidentally discover that he can travel with her if they are touching while she is transported to the past, and on one trip he is taken back with her. Throughout Dana and Kevin’s stay at the Weylin plantation, where they are forced to pose as master and slave, he appears to be vulnerable to the influence of the racialized power of the era. They slip into their roles with an ease that Dana finds unsettling, “Time passed. Kevin and I became more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, and accepting. That disturbed me too when I thought about it. How easily we seemed to acclimatize.” He is able to become quite comfortable living in this historical moment, a comfort which is often disturbing in the way it encourages accommodation to,
apologies for, and sometimes open investment in a white supremacist nation-building project,

“This could be a great time to live in,” Kevin said once. “I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true.”

“West,” I said bitterly. “That’s where they’re doing it to Indians instead of the blacks!”

He looked at me strangely. He had been doing that a lot lately.145

This scene vividly exemplifies the difference in white and black temporalities that always troubles the time-travel narrative. White subjectivities are able to experience the past as an adventure, aligning themselves with heroic narratives that celebrate the white supremacist nation-building project, that silence or naturalize the labor and violence that make possible the imagined luxuries and exploits that even only a few whites enjoyed. Though the history of enslavement is not particular to Black people but is the history of the country at large, all of its pain, tragedy, and trauma is somehow located on the black body alone. According to Christina Sharpe, “while all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the (New World) black subject.”146 The white, male, propertied Kevin (indeed the Man of humanity), is somehow unable to see the agony, hardship, and death of the enslaved on the plantation he is living on, as well as the that of the indigenous people being subjected to forced labor and genocide in the West—Dana’s mention of these ‘others’ interrupts his ability to revel in the past as a
novel, heroic adventure and incurs his ‘strange look’ at her, a look that constructs her, rather than white greed and violence, as the problem.

Kevin’s look, along with the unsettling ease with which he fits into the Weylin household, also suggests that there are unresolved and powerful links between their contemporary relationship and the master-slave role that they are playing. Dana alludes to this possibility in her exasperated reflections upon Kevin’s earlier attempts to secure free labor from her and use of anger to try to control her behavior. While Kevin might see his petulant insistence that Dana type papers for him as simply a challenge for her to prove her commitment, it is mentioned alongside his modern-day marriage proposal and their historical master-slave playacting for a purpose. Kevin’s desire and ability to experience the past as an adventure, highlights the contemporary privilege of whiteness, a privilege that allows him to ignore the post-slavery subjectivity that he also embodies, “You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer… But now and then, like with the kid’s game, I can’t maintain the distance.”

His attempt to read slavery on the Weylin plantation positively echoes his utter incredulity at his family’s anger at his marriage to Dana; he is resistant to destabilizing a colorblind framework that would complicate his position as a white man married to a Black woman. Kevin’s defense of slavery is the extreme of what colorblind racism make possible. Kevin becomes a member of master class not merely because of his whiteness, but because of his refusal to recognize the differential power and trauma accorded to raced bodies, including his own, in the past or in the present, where he takes Dana’s labor for granted. In order to be worthy of Dana in the present, he must renounce this investment in
whiteness, in the ‘great mythologies’ of the past, by engaging in the cause of liberation, and by becoming physically marked by the experience. Dana is highly alert to the horrors and injustices of enslavement through race and lineage, but Kevin requires a longer apprenticeship.

Kevin becomes more submerged in the antebellum era after Dana is scared back into the present without him, stranding him for several years. He has a choice: to continue reveling in the privileged position of master and the racist excitement of mythical U.S. history or to risk his privilege and expose himself to danger. He chooses the latter, abandoning the Weylin plantation in disgust and working to help slaves escape. Dana is the one who does not come back whole, losing an arm on her last trip home, but Kevin is marked as well, “He looked more than ten years older than when I had last seen him. There was a jagged scar across his forehead—the remnant of what must have been a bad wound.” 149 This marking troubles the idea that Dana’s choice of a white man in the present somehow reflects her own ignorance or dismissal of history, or some kind of allegiance to the master class. This pairing of white men in the past and the future are a strategy of both *Sankofa* and *Kindred*. Where in *Sankofa* both white men are stable, twin figures of lust and violent exploitation, both Rufus and Kevin are allowed humanity, complexity, and the opportunity for transformation. Where Rufus ultimately fails this challenge, Kevin rises to it, enough for him and Dana to share the past, while acknowledging their different levels of injury within it. 150 While Kevin’s unease at returning to the present can be attributed to the fact that he was stuck in the nineteenth century for five years, we can also read it as his uneasy realization of his difference from
his wife, the history that difference carries, and the psychic and structural repercussions of that history. His visit to the site of the Weylin plantation along with Dana at the book’s closing can be read as an act of him claiming that history as his own, as well as hers. Dana and Kevin can bond over this experience while realizing the very different ways in which they lived it and live its repercussions in the contemporary moment. Because Kevin does not remain invested in and does not attempt to leverage the power which whiteness might grant him, he is able to actually love Dana, in a way that Rufus never could. Meanwhile, Dana must contend with the fact that sexual violence at the hands of white men (a violence which she, ironically both witnesses and enables) is an extricable part of her family’s and the nation’s history, but does not have to over determine her present-day choices. Still, we are left with a sense of uneasiness about their future and their racial inheritance, as Dana repeatedly sees things in Kevin that remind her of Weylin. Kindred does not attempt to dismiss all of the tensions of interracial erotics, but it does highlight the inadequacy of colorblindedness and destabilizes both matriarchy discourse and the attachment of racial history to the black body alone.

Over the course of Rufus’s life, Dana’s magical appearances and her role in saving him secure a degree of influence which she attempts to use to ameliorate conditions for herself and other enslaved people, some who she develops bonds with, and some with whom she is blood related. This influence seems to create temporary suspensions of the normal power relations between her and the white slaveowners, as she interacts with them in ways that often feel incredulous to a reader: being welcomed into the parlor to meet with Rufus’s father and developing a friendship with Rufus powerful
enough to persuade him to lie about being badly beaten by a male slave. Though her ‘power’ provides some benefits, it eventually proves to be largely ineffectual: Dana is still beaten when she teaches slaves to read, the ancestor who she attempts to help escape is still recaptured, precious members of the slave community that she joins are still sold away. When she surmises that her repeated castings into this dangerous past are for a purpose, to rescue Rufus until her ancestor Hagar can be conceived with his slave mistress Alice, she finds herself in the position of assisting with and impatiently witnessing Alice’s sexual subjugation. This painful irony is punctuated by Dana’s repeated returns to the present, where it remains the year 1976, the year of the nation’s centennial. It is not only the U.S.’s nation-building project and all who benefit from that project that are complicit in the violence enacted upon enslaved people, it is Dana herself. For she believes that the condition of possibility for her own existence is the subjugation of her ancestor Alice, and she is indelibly culpable in Alice’s fate. Because Rufus believes that he actually loves Alice (a belief and love enabled by Dana’s recurring influence upon his character), he refuses to be the apparent aggressor of a slave master, to use physical violence to forcibly rape her. Rather, he requires, and enlists Dana in insisting, that Alice come to him.\(^{152}\)

Approached by Dana as Rufus’s messenger, Alice entertains a narrow range of options, run again be mauled by dogs or worse, be sold away to possibly worse conditions, or become the master’s mistress. As property, outside the domain of the liberal bourgeois concepts of freedoms and rights, she has no access to the thing we might call choice. Her entertainment of a narrow range of options and decisive move
towards one of them brings to mind the similar move practiced by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* in getting involved with a different white man than her master, “There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.” Jacobs recognizes that to sleep with a man is not actually freedom, but still she acts within the limitations of her life to assert some measure of control over her body. I refer to this act as the audacity of ‘choice’. Alice, also, exercises the audacity of choice in deciding to go to Rufus and endure a long-term relationship. By doing so, Alice is able to secure a better quality of life for herself and acknowledgement, education, and freedom for her two children. At times it seems that the relationship with Rufus surpasses her grim acquiescence to have moments of real affection and pleasure—a state of affairs that others in the slave community would not hold against her. The other women on the plantation understand all too well the ways in which affective and sexual labor enables their survival and encourage both Alice and Dana to put it to use however they can; whether they experience any pleasure in these relationships does nothing to change the situation save perhaps make it more bearable, “I thought she was finally settlin’ down with him—getting not to mind so much.” Assuming that Dana is the concubine of her husband Kevin, the plantation cook advises Dana to use this position to her advantage, with no hint of the distaste or judgment with which such uses of sexuality are contemporarily read,

“I see you and him together sometimes when you think nobody’s looking. You can make him do just about anything you want him to do.”
Her smile surprised me. I would have expected her to be disgusted with me—or with Kevin.

“Fact,” she continued, “if you got any sense, you’ll try to get him to free you now while you still young and pretty enough for him to listen.”\(^{155}\)

There is potential for pleasure in the relationship between Rufus and Alice despite its forced nature, but Rufus’s attempt to demonstrate his power over Alice by pretending to sell her children disrupts the possibility for any lasting contentment. Dana’s time travel upsets Rufus’s acculturation as a slave master and his ability to “love” Dana and Alice occasionally has some influence in the amelioration of their conditions, but this love ultimately fails when it is placed against the inordinate power that he holds over their lives.

The Dana-Rufus-Alice triangle, an antebellum era entanglement of familial, emotional, and legal bonds is significant in that it shows the complexity of affective relationships that must have occurred during slavery, but cannot be read through the more widely available frameworks of a slave woman who is either helplessly raped or actively resisting. Alice chooses, for a time at least, to survive, and to select survival from a narrow range of choices which her bondage engenders; this survival necessitates a form of sexual labor which is no less forced though it might not be cast as rape as rape is narrowly defined and it might allow for moments of tenderness and pleasure. In Alice we see the slave who survives as more than just someone who survives, as Weheliye reads the Muselman as more than just a being that exists as ‘bare life.’ Survival is often talked of as if it is the bare minimum of life. As if to survive, to stay alive in the face of immense threats and pressures is a purely biological, thoughtless act. But for those who
live under constant assault on their physical and psychic lives, whose reality is daily subjected to forces and whims that they cannot control, to survive is an active verb—the act of survival entails much more than the act of drawing one’s next breath. For Alice and so many other enslaved people, survival was an intellectual exercise, requiring constant watchfulness, various negotiations, and difficult ‘choices’ exercised in a context where choice was, indeed, impossible. As the Muselman actually dreams, hungers, and envisions alternate realities, Alice, even while being subjected and seeming to submit, lives a textured and complicated life. She nurtures her children while dreaming and agitating for their future, she cares for and protects her friends, she engages in fistfights, backtalk, and attitude. She loves—her first love, her community, her friends, her descendant Dana even in her knowledge of Dana’s betrayal, her children, and perhaps, even Rufus. Dana suggests as much when trying to determine the reason for—after several years with Rufus—Alice’s sudden urge to escape, though she is relatively comfortable as the slave master’s mistress, and has the burden of two small children,

I got the feeling that Alice was keeping him happy—and maybe finally enjoying herself a little in the process. I guessed from what she had told me that this was what was frightening her so, driving her away from the plantation, causing her to lash out at me. She was dealing with guilt of her own.156

The extension of Alice’s love to Rufus should not be viewed in the context of images of doting mammies and pandering Uncle Toms. It is not to be thought of alongside the happy, scraping, shuffling slave discourse so justifiably reviled by Black Power rhetoric. It is not blind or grateful or simple; it knows all too well the ugliness and violence wrapped up in its own conditions of possibility. It would not stop her from
killing him if given the opportunity and possible escape from reprisal. This love is a frightening and powerful thing, fully cognizant of its horror in the face of Rufus’s violence and betrayal. It holds the key to the transformation that Rufus will never be capable of because he will never cede the privilege that forces Alice into his possession. Butler suggests Alice’s softening feelings towards Rufus and a moment full of utopian potential, an opening for a permanent rupture of the power plays that prohibit a fuller intimacy, “For the first and only time, I saw her smile at him—a real smile. No sarcasm, no ridicule. It silenced him for several seconds.” This one smile, such a charged moment of intimate possibility, suggests that Alice could forgive the unforgiveable, that Rufus could, like Kevin, reject the role of owner and seek to earn, rather than compel Alice’s fidelity. But Rufus only becomes more determined to control Alice through whatever means he can. His staged sale of his and Alice’s children is not only the ultimate betrayal, it is a reminder of his utter incapacity, because of his position as master, to love as Alice loves. And, in the end, perhaps it is partly her horror at this thing we might dare call love that occasions Alice’s resolution to end the task of survival.

*Kindred* is a complex novel that certainly makes available many readings, and I cannot conduct an analysis of Kindred without addressing Linh U. Hua’s compelling rereading of the novel and its critical treatment. Hua brilliantly calls into question generous readings of *Kindred* as a progressive text, pointing out how Dana, readers, and critics accept the reasoning that Rufus must be saved and Alice must be raped in order for Dana to exist in the present/future. Hua points out the many fissures in the novel that suggest lack of such an immediately causal relationship between the novel’s past and
future, claims that Alice, not Rufus, may have been Dana’s caller, and proposes other possibilities for the Dana-Alice relationship—rescue, for one. Butler’s own design of the world of *Kindred* allows for these possibilities. Almost every time Dana is called back to save Rufus, Alice is also in some kind of peril, and Dana’s transportation of Kevin along with her proves that she can move people through time. That neither Dana or the novel’s critics seem to grasp these possibilities, according to Hua, aligns them[us] with white heteropatriarchal capitalism’s speculative time. According to Hua, “Speculative time underscores a relation between whiteness and futurity that is secured through contractual investments in the slave trade, investments that are sentimentalized into a historical narrative by liberal philosophy as the developmental time of the subject.” Speculative time naturalizes slavery and the violence experienced within it, making historical trauma appropriate as a necessary stage for the progressive narrative. This speculative time celebrates linear history, capitalism, and the sacrifices of exploited peoples of color, assigning the future to whiteness while relegating black people in particular as historical artifacts. Looking at this concept of speculative time along with my contention that the slave past is gendered as feminine by Black Power discourse, we can presume that speculative time is particularly violent in its treatment of Black women.

As an alternative to the linearity and violence of speculative time, Hua introduces the concept of black feminist sentimentality,

Black feminist sentimentality refuses speculative time as a temporal narrative that insures “the future” on the continual violation and manipulation of black female subjects… It likewise refuses liberatory trajectories as an effective means to black feminist social and political coalition. Current readings of *Kindred* naturalize the causal linearity between past/future relations and subordinate Alice’s abuses to Dana’s
liberatory trajectory, exposing in speculative time an antiblackness that materializes as history.\footnote{159}

I cannot disagree with Hua. What often becomes disturbing in *Kindred* is the impatience by which Dana witnesses Alice’s subordination to Rufus, as she awaits the birth of her ancestor Hagar, even as she cares for Alice and tries to help her in many ways. I recognize that an alignment with the violence of speculative time may be a troubling facet of this novel, but I also venture to suggest that the black feminist sentimentality that Hua describes is precisely the novel’s larger goal. Sadly, Alice’s fate is predetermined, to the point that perhaps it forecloses other radical possibilities for the novel, but that foreclosure is precisely the impetus for the novel’s existence. Consistently, Butler’s work deals with the negotiations, strategies, and compromises of defeated peoples, with the kinds of relationships that develop in the context of unequal power relations. Alice cannot get away, because Butler’s concerns and questions seem to largely be for those who cannot get away. For, in Butler’s refusal to rescue Alice from her fate, in her choice to have Dana, as an avatar for contemporary African American subjectivity, bear witness to the rape and concubinage of an enslaved woman, she is seeking to intervene in the post-Black Power moment’s condescending posture towards the slave. The choice that Dana ultimately makes, the option she denies to Alice (killing Rufus) is figured in Kindred as the *least courageous* option; it is the descendants of slaves who so boldly proclaim what they would do if they were in their ancestors’ position, who are weaker,

“He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying.”
“If your black ancestors had felt that way, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I told you when this all started that I didn’t have their endurance. I still don’t. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what.”

There are many moments when Dana and Alice seem to merge, particularly in how they are viewed by the other slaves on the plantation (the master’s women) and by Rufus, “We’re two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head.” Yet, while Sankofa pulls Shola and Mona into one body and subjectivity, the narrative of Kindred brings Dana very close to Alice but also reminds us that neither she, nor us as readers, can ever really know what Alice experiences or feels. At one point, when discussing if she should “go to” Rufus, Alice asks Dana what she would do, to which she responds, “We’re in different situations. What I’d do doesn’t matter.” Hua reads this as another example of Dana’s refusal to fully identify with Alice, a refusal incurred by her predetermined understanding of Alice’s fate and its role in her own production. But I interpret this as Dana’s acceptance of a truth, that even going back to experience slavery, even getting a taste of the labor, the beatings, the discomforts, does not give her the privilege to say what Alice—for whom this is not a series of visitations that she can escape from, but her daily life—should do. Perhaps Kindred does throw Alice under the wagon in necessitating her misery for Dana’s liberation, and doing little to upset the assumption that this is how it must be. But I find that if we center Alice, rather than Dana, as the true protagonist of the novel, then we come closer to understanding Butler’s larger aims—Kindred’s intentional positioning in response to and in context of Black Power discourse. Butler allows these oversights because her ultimate goal is not to rescue Alice, or even to explore what a real contemporary Black person does or should do in
Alice’s position, but to bring a contemporary subjectivity into direct, intimate contact with the kinds of choices someone like Alice has to make to survive.

Close to end of the novel, Dana is rescued from the Weylin plantation by Kevin, and tries to say goodbye to Alice, who does not wave back. Centering Dana’s experience in the scene, Hua argues that it [the goodbye scene] “functions as a snapshot that freezes Alice, a black female slave, and renders her at once impenetrable and exposed. Butler develops the scene from the vantage point of her main character, E. Dana Franklin, whose memorial disposition in the scene reduces Alice to the numbing effect of labor and repetition, the “beating and beating of those pants”164 Yet, couldn’t we also read Alice’s refusal to say goodbye, the ‘missing wave’ between them as a refusal to participate in the sentimentality of the ancestor and descendant bonding across time? Isn’t this lack of closure supposed to signify the impossibility of any closure in a revisiting of slavery, a revisiting that exposes our complicity, and are inextricability from the violence of enslavement? If we prioritize Alice’s vantage point in this moment, rather than Dana’s, then she is active in this scene, refusing to hear Dana’s call, refusing to provide the kinds of comfort, closure, moral lessons, or ‘pride’ that the descendants of slaves often seek in their returns to the past. Hua makes the brilliant connection between the unanswered wave and Dana’s arm, which is lost (cut off by Nigel, Hua and textual evidence suggest) on her last trip home. The loss of this arm is also the first line of the novel. Dana’s severed return is very unlike the return in Sankofa, in which Mona comes back whole, naked, and physically and psychically purified. Kindred refuses Gerima’s vision of a liberatory trajectory dependent upon the cleansing violence of overt revolution, or of the
past as a site of learning that will produce a properly disciplined and enlightened cultural nationalist subject. Dana comes back to the present with one arm and no easy answers. Asked about the choice to sever Dana’s arm, Butler said, “I couldn’t let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole.”

Though Butler’s comments are intended for the actual victims of slavery, they can also be read as a comment on all post-slavery subjectivities—slavery didn’t leave us quite whole. But perhaps un-wholeness does not only have to be interpreted only through the lens of damage and lack. Perhaps our political energies can be put to better uses than seeking the imagined wholeness of African families prior to intrusion of the master’s body and law.

Popular and some academic black political discourse often reads the experiences of enslaved Black women enslavement through one dominant frame, a frame which focuses upon the assault on Black men, black heterosexual relationships, and the stability of the black family. This dominant frame tends to see Black women at best as violent resisters and at worst on opposite axes of helpless, degraded victims and willing seductresses. It suggests that Black women redirect their attentions and dependence on Black men as a precondition for both “strong” families and political liberation. As Horton-Stallings warns, “In addition to undermining the race border, the slave master’s desire also trespasses against the border of nation building.”

If the slave master’s desire is a trespass, the slave woman’s return or initiation of this desire in any form can be rendered as a travesty. Butler’s act of postmemory speaks intentionally to a rewriting of archetypes of Black enslaved women that take some of their strength from the fears of
racial trespass. Butler engages directly with Black nationalist tendencies to privilege certain forms and figures of resistance:

She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The housenigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter...I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. Or it did until Rufus and Nigel drove into town and came back with what was left of Alice.\textsuperscript{167}

Butler’s time travel device allows twentieth century black common sense to come into contact with the horrors of American slavery, confounding attempts to project archetypes of antebellum slaves onto contemporary politics. She uses the speculative to probe the possibilities and limitations of something like love with the master class and focus upon women’s understanding of themselves within circumstances that they negotiate to the best of their ability. Acts of postmemory imagine ways in which Black women lived regardless, even in the moments in which they were being constructed for the benefit of others. Their feelings, motivations, and experiences confound “The suggestion that such relationships are driven, on the woman’s part, by self-hatred, masochism, and a desire to demean black people as a group.”\textsuperscript{168} As Octavia Butler says quite simply when asked about her representations of marginalized people and social power, “You do what you have to do. You make the best use of whatever power you have.”\textsuperscript{169}
Chapter Three
Neoliberal Nightmares: The Crisis of Ladyhood in Nicole Sconiers’ *Escape from Beckyville*

*Escape from Beckyville: Tales of Hair, Race and Rage* was published in 2011 by its author, Nicole Sconiers, a former producer with Dr. Phil’s talk television show. Frustrated by her limited opportunities for creativity and the repeated frustration of her attempts to sell her own screenplays, she resigned from her job and launched Spring Lane Publishing. For Sconiers, *Escape from Beckyville* and the accompanying countrywide tour and ambitious publicity campaign she undertook to promote it was not just a book, but a national movement to create and promote a wider range of representations of Black women’s stories, to contest the assertion (that she often received with rejections of her screenplays) that Black people, particularly Black women, had no place in science fiction. Reflecting the experiences and anxieties of its origins in the imagination of a relatively affluent Black woman living and working in predominantly white environments, it also, perhaps unwittingly, reflects a late capitalist, neoliberal historical moment in which behavioral politics and moderate liberal reform often appear to be the only acceptable means through which African Americans should seek social change.

As an independently published text, *Escape from Beckyville* presents a prime opportunity to read Black women’s literature and black political discourse not mediated by content editing, market demands, or the mainstream publishing industry. Taking advantage of new media technologies and platforms, Sconiers was able to circumvent the boundaries of traditional publishing and take control of all aspects of the publishing
process, including cover art. This is a notable achievement, especially in the context of science fiction, a genre where multiple writers attest to having their characters whitened or exoticized to appeal to the appetites and expectations of white readers. On the cover of *Escape from Beckyville* a dark-skinned Black woman with big, thick natural hair runs down a deserted street of a purple-toned city, looking over her shoulder, not quite at the reader. She looks at once frightened and confident, wearing a full-skirted, brightly colored dress that swings over muscled shins. Though she is clearly under some kind of threat she also looks fabulous, and unable to be encapsulated by any of the myriad of images often imposed upon Black women. This is purposeful; Nicole Sconiers describes her artistic mission in a way that very much aligns it with a traditional Black feminist cultural criticism, “I’m subverting tropes of black womanhood — Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire —.” My work is in many ways enabled by, dependent upon, and in tension with this black feminist project. Believing that these singular tropes of black womanhood can be reinstituted through an analysis that uses them as a frame, I propose to look instead at overlapping and interdependent discourses—and to disentangle the logics that would juxtapose positive with negative representations of black womanhood. Ladyhood—the performance of controlled, sexually constrained, aesthetically conservative black femininity—is one such ‘positive’ discourse of representation. I argue that in addition to critiquing external racism, *Escape from Beckyville* uses the technological and fantastic to highlight the inadequacies of the project of black ladyhood, as the futuristic West Los Angeles dwelling protagonists of her stories find their attempts to perform respectable middle-class femininity attacked from both outside and within. I
contend that these characters’ experiences elucidate the costs of ladyhood (and the limitations of the politics of liberal individualism) in an increasingly inequitable society.

In the concluding chapter of a longer work studying the theorizing and activism of Black Baptist churchwomen between 1900 and 1920, Evelyn Higginbotham focuses upon the contours and functions of a ‘politics of respectability’ in their lives and social work. According to Higginbotham, “The politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy of reform of the entire structural system of American race relations.”

Higginbotham emphasizes that the politics of respectability was a multi-directional concept, aimed not only at careful self-presentation but also at refuting white supremacist claims and depictions of Black people as animalistic, childlike, and unfit for the extension of citizenship and civil rights and disproving the plethora of stereotypes that justified abusive treatment of Black women. Respectability discourse reflected a concern with the political and material implications of how Black people were perceived in the broader society and also lent itself and also provided a form of differentiation both within and between classes, as the working class women of the Baptist Woman’s Convention opposed what they perceived as negative practices of both the black lower classes (idleness and slovenliness) and the upper (condescension and frivolity.)

Contemporary references to the politics of respectability rarely mention that Higginbotham theorized this concept in the context of the thought and activism of poor and working class Black women, overlapping, but not synonymous with the bourgeois womanhood practiced by middle class club women of the same era. It (the politics of
respectability) has become shorthand for a number of social, political, and critical practices which, operating with an awareness of the political functions of images of black deviance, choose to shield, scorn, or refute displays of black excess. For the purpose of precision, I center ladyhood, rather than the politics of respectability more broadly, in this chapter. Ladyhood recalls more specifically the ideals of true womanhood that kept middle class white women [safely] imprisoned on their narrow pedestals, that Black middle class women of the uplift era turned to as a way to refute the accusations of black depravity that were used to exclude Black people from full citizenship. While Black women’s activism, work force participation, and high involvement in black civil society ensured that ladyhood would never contain the exact meanings for Black women as it did for white women, black female middle class politics framed gentility, virtue, and self-improvement as necessary for self-defense and the elevation of Black people, who, Black women of the Victorian era surmised, could not rise without the ‘improvement’ of Black women.

The motto of the National Association of Colored Women, (The NACW was an umbrella for Black women’s clubs throughout the country), “Lifting as We Climb” remains significant in histories of Black women’s activism from the era. This motto was sometimes expressed through sophisticated analyses of intersectional oppression, assertive demands to expand women’s roles in social revolution, and dramatic campaigns for public education, community health, birth control, and anti-lynching—but it just as easily lent itself to projects such as domestic arts education programs for freedwomen and cotillion balls for middle class adolescents. In the interest of countering images of
animalistic sexuality, Black “race” women suppressed discussion of sexuality and attempted to fashion themselves and other Black women into morally upright, unassailable ideals. These tendencies remained ingrained in Black women’s, particularly middle class Black women’s, politics of representation and in the black feminist tradition that so often identifies the 19th century club movement thinkers as the foremothers of a black feminist movement. For example, drawing on the work of Cheryl Gilkes, Trudier Harris, and Barbara Christian on stereotypes of Black women, Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* centered the language and role of ‘controlling images’ in black feminist critical practice, and tended to take strategies of ‘respectability’ and ‘dissemblance’ for granted as necessary practices for self and community protection. This framework of black feminist criticism sometimes privileges the white gaze and the prospect of violence resulting from that gaze over Black women’s own authorship, self-definition, and self-expression. This position also often has an uneasy relationship to class, prioritizing the strategies of shielding and resistance (‘cultures of dissemblance’ and ‘standing up straight in a crooked room’) more likely to be practiced by middle class Black women.

My current work draws together black speculative fictions and the narrative techniques involving Black women in both the mainstream and African American politics. Departing from black feminist criticism’s long and understandable preoccupation with pathological representations of Black women, I charge that so-called ‘positive’ constructions of womanhood are just as likely to invoke racist and sexist violence. Departing from the optimism and critical generosity found in the burgeoning field of
Afrofuturism, I am interested in how speculative fiction registers our most disturbing contemporary political investments.

Ladyhood as a gendered strategy of representation can be located within liberal black politics, a politics of inclusion, in which those protesting their subordinate condition wage their claims to inclusion upon morality and shared humanity with the oppressor class. Saidya Hartman identifies a key formative moment of black liberalism in her theorization of the burden of ‘abolition,’ that demanded that freedmen and women prove their individual worth, “The ascribed responsibility of the liberal individual served to displace the nation’s responsibility for providing and ensuring the rights and privileges conferred by the Reconstruction Amendments and shifted the burden of duty onto the freed.” Erica Edwards also describes how the ‘freedom’ within a liberal democracy offered after abolition demanded that blacks prove themselves as exceptional and dignified individuals worthy of the benefits of citizenship. According to Edwards, this demand helped to institute individual exceptionality, in the form of a charismatic black patriarch who would act as representative and spokesperson for Black people, as a central feature in black politics. Both of these authors treat the period during and after Reconstruction following the Civil War, when millions of African Americans gained nominal free status, demanding new negotiations of their relationship to the state and larger society. If we follow Manning Marable’s lead that the tumultuous legal and social changes of the ‘long civil rights movement’ constituted a Second Reconstruction, then we are again living in post-Reconstruction. Similar to the rollback of federal protection and intervention to help Black freed people secure citizenship, resources, and minimal
expectation to live unmolested in the aftermath of the social and political experiments of Reconstruction, our current moment represents an attack on protective and redistributive public agencies and policies alongside a heightened visibility of inequality and racialized violence. These contemporary post-Reconstruction developments and the ideologies that guide them can be described as neoliberalism.

Incorporating several central tenets of classical liberalism’s secular faith in free markets and a limited state, neoliberalism is an ongoing project preoccupying both domestic and global corporations and institutions over the last forty years—the corporate-driven dismantling of the New Deal Coalition in favor of upward distribution of resources. In this ongoing formation, funds are diverted from social programs towards the kinds of mechanisms that ensure environments favorable to business profits—protections for private property rights, stable currency, a strong and omnipresent military, and international agencies that compel states to allow the U.S. and Europe unfettered access to cheap labor, growing markets, and resources throughout the world. Though neoliberal ideology and policy often has a disastrous effect on populations of color, it finds it necessary to also enlist these populations in its deployment. According to Lisa Duggan, “During every phase, the construction of neoliberal politics and policy in the U.S. has relied on identity and cultural politics.” Duggan explains how neoliberalism’s alliance with the neoconservative bloc of white supremacists, uber-nationalists, and religious moralists reformed itself in the 1990s, including nominal and minimal material commitments to diversity, civil rights, and inclusion while doing little to alter patterns of
upward distribution. But these modest shifts were enough to coopt and utilize the politics of the very groups that neoliberalism most deprived.¹⁸⁴

I identify black liberalism, and the gendered performative demands associated with it, as one of these forms of politics narrowed and exacerbated by neoliberal logics. As blatant racism is a financial liability for the pro-corporate interests driving the formation of neoliberalism, interests that require unfettered access to labor pools and growing markets of non-white groups, these groups are incorporated in ways that are compatible with neoliberalism. The forms of identity politics most likely to receive sanction and circulation by corporate-controlled state and media interests are those that emphasize not material but token redistribution, in the form of the trickle-down benefits of cultural representation. According to this logic, black representatives improve their community by advancing themselves within corporate capitalism, hoping to break down the barriers in advancement for Black people more broadly by physically embodying the refutation of stereotypes. Rather than consenting to the interference of an expansive state that enforces anti-discrimination law, checks market excesses, and redistributes resources downward, neoliberalism demands that black representatives take on the labor of breaking glass ceilings and steel doors primarily through the force of well-groomed bodies, ‘proper’ speech, and exceptional performance (not only of their jobs but also of orderly and grateful behavior.) For the middle class subjects burdened with this labor, the unruly behavior of those that they are racially and culturally linked with, but who refuse to or are unable to perform properly, represents not only embarrassment, but a tangible threat to hard-fought, if paltry gains within corporate capitalism. The intraracial
discipline of poor, working class, youth, or otherwise nonconforming subjects (through mentorship, training programs, campaigns against forms of dress or slang thought to be especially shameful) is framed in terms of generosity and concern, but is also reflective of the middle class subject’s worry about their own precarious position.

In other words, as the state retreats from the task of mediating a more equitable distribution of rights, protections, and resources, as responses to social problems are increasingly privatized, the mandate “to prove individual worth” intensifies. But for racialized people who constantly move through the world against the backdrop of lively cultural distortions, complete individualism may not be possible—proving individual worth is not enough. The excess of other black subjects linked to the middle class subjects by race has to be shielded or controlled. Read in the context of neoliberalism, the phrase, “Lifting as We Climb” reveals its potentially disciplinary functions.

Nicole Sconiers’ sets each story of her collection in an affluent area of a city that at times closely, at times only vaguely resembles a near-future West Los Angeles. An incredibly diverse city with a liberal political culture also marked by rigid racial segregation, stark economic inequality, and one of the largest housing crises in the country, Los Angeles is a prime site to look at the operation of black personhood within neoliberalism. ‘Becky’ is a common nominal term used by Black women to refer to ‘white girls’ who use their privileged position and ability to claim innocence to condescend to Black people, particularly Black women. Beckyism is a common form of numerous microaggressions that Black women face in neoliberal culture, which places the burden on the few incorporated people of color to contribute the benefit of their
difference while also blending in seamlessly and without complaining. *Escape from Beckyville* uses the speculative to highlight these overt and subtle forms of racism that operate in affluent environments where whites and a very few Blacks share space. One story, “Here Come the Janes” depicts vampirish white women who grow strong from the consumption of Black women’s hair, which creepily echoes many African American women’s interactions with curious roommates and coworkers who request to touch our hair and ask if it is real and how often we wash it. Another piece, “A Revolution for Black Maids (Who Have Escaped Their White Female Authors),” is a direct response to the success of the novel and film *The Help*. I am particularly interested, however, in the text’s present but perhaps less intended critique of black intraracial politics. For this purpose, I focus on two stories, “Metamorphia” and “Scotoma.”

The opening story of *Escape from Beckyville*, “Metamorphia,” follows a Black woman who wakes up one morning in the body of a white woman. The title plays on the title of “Metamorphosis,” Kafka’s famous story of a man inexplicably transformed into a large insect, a story that is not usually read in the context of science fiction. “Metamorphia” also reflects the trope of physical transfiguration into the racial other, that we find in texts like George Schuyler’s *Black No More*. This trope is a recurring one in black science fiction, a type of unstable embodiment that allows for a comic, and also often horrific play with both the utter fictitiousness and durability of race. Nice. Like the fly transformation in Kafka’s story, and the time travel device in Butler’s *Kindred*, the technology for Penelope’s transformation is never explained. Despite the claims of some science fiction writers and critics (often the same people who try to exclude Black
women’s work from this genre), the *science* of a science fiction story is not always central to the text. The story happens in the characters’ human response to the extraordinary situation that the suspension of material rules of reality allows for. We do not need to know how Penelope turns into a white woman; just accept it enough to witness what it reveals—her conflicted relationship to blackness and her hyperawareness of how she is perceived.

Penelope seems to go through life under the duress of extreme self-consciousness, always seeing herself primarily through the [imagined] eyes of others. While understandable for a Black female character in a society where Black women live under direct and indirect surveillance, Penelope’s hyperawareness extends to the most miniscule of choices and situations. Though Penelope expresses fear and distaste of other Black people and all black neighborhoods, she steels herself to travel from her trendy mid-Los Angeles neighborhood to Inglewood (a municipality bordering South Los Angeles) to purchase a painting of a Black woman. Penelope portrays this probably twenty-minute drive as a harrowing journey, “She had ventured from her condo in Miracle Mile to an African art store in Inglewood, so proud of herself for braving the unfamiliar streets, the men hawking essential oils and T-shirts on street corners.”¹⁸⁶ She admits that she chose this particular painting not because of artistic value or affinity with the woman pictures, but because it “accentuated her mahogany furniture and would make her friends think she was cultured.”¹⁸⁷ She cuts her hair and wears it natural not because of any desire to embrace blackness but in order to distinguish herself from a multitude of other long-haired Black women in Los Angeles, and admits to not valuing, nurturing, or
caring for her hair the way she had when it was long and straight. Unable to disengage from the exterior gaze she imposes on herself, Penelope’s true tastes and values remain unclear. She is at once ambivalent about her racial identity and uncertain about a way of being that does not foreground it. Unable, it seems, to engage blackness on a deeper level than style, she carefully constructs and performs a persona of tasteful black pride. Penelope works in what we can presume to be an upper-class boutique, where she carefully drops grad school vocabulary into normal conversation. Her performance of difference is perfectly suited to the demands of neoliberalism; she enacts a veneer of blackness that provides evidence of diversity without being threatening to the neoliberal order.

We can read this story as an expression of Penelope’s racial ambivalence. We can also read it as a commentary on white privilege, as in the body of the white woman she receives courtesies she had never been accorded by neighbors and store clerks. But the larger tension in this story is Penelope’s intraracial preoccupation with class performance. It is noteworthy that her transformation into a white woman is not just physical—Penelope, as possessed by the blonde, lacks control over movement, speech, and action. She has no volition so must both embody and witness behavior that is decidedly against Penelope’s own performance of middle class black womanhood, which Lisa Thompson aptly describes, “This performance [middle-class womanhood] relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes.”
Penelope’s frustration and horror derive to a much greater degree from the woman’s coarse and “trashy” behavior than the loss of her black body. She says as much when she laments, “And if a white woman had to commandeer her body, why couldn’t she be educated and classy?” In her reactions to the blonde’s activities (cursing, talking loudly, shoplifting, eating fast food, belching, and socializing easily with the Black women at the hair shop) we see the ways in which Penelope’s self-crafting has corresponded assiduously to the demands of ladyhood: careful self-presentation, language, consumption patterns, and sexual reticence and restraint. Even washing herself does not escape these demands, “Trashy. Penelope never bathed without using a washcloth…But the stranger soaped up with abandon, pressing suds into her armpits, lathering nipples like faded rose petals.”

We can also read Penelope’s growing hatred of the woman who has occupied her body as envy of her [the blonde’s] seeming lack of self-consciousness, her apparent freedom from a gaze which Penelope continues to invoke even as the body which she is traveling in does not. Penelope is anxiety-ridden every time Becky (as Penelope calls the white invader, who eventually begins using the name herself) comes into contact with Black women. For example,

A sullen black woman handed the blonde her order. A pyramid of synthetic curls jutted beneath her McDonald’s cap. Her lobes were weighed down with earrings so large that Penelope could have thrust her fist through the center….Penelope was embarrassed for the cashier, as if the woman’s tacky hair and jewelry were her own. She felt an urge to protect her from the blonde’s gaze. She expected the woman to utter some slur beneath her breath, but she didn’t.

This “urge to protect” is of particular interest to me. Penelope’s protective impulse brings to mind the ways in which African American elites’ presumption to
“protect” the race and the more vulnerable members of it has often manifested in forms of discipline, in which middle class African Americans’ assertion of themselves as representatives and guardians both elide and police intra-racial difference.

By rereading and complicating the ideologies and activities of Victorian-era activists, Black feminist scholars have increasingly attended to the silences on class and sexuality in their own critical tradition.” 193 Victoria Wolcott illustrates intra-racial tensions and discipline vividly in her study of respectability politics in interwar Detroit, as the black bourgeois reacted to large influxes of incoming migrants with efforts like the “Dress Well” club, providing venues for “wholesome” heterosocial activities, and writing with scorn and embarrassment at the loud dress and behavior of the “new rich” at Negro Baseball League games. 194 The resonance of this discourse of female respectability, and the way in which it gets deployed between different class locations but through an ideology of shared kinship remains powerful today. Though stated in the context of “protection,” Penelope’s desire to shield the drive-through worker’s excess (of too large earrings, too much fake hair, too much attitude) from the white woman’s eyes is less about the drive-through worker’s material circumstances than it is about what this excess might suggest about Penelope. Penelope’s reaction to her predicament operates within a politics of individualist liberalism that is particularly concerned with, as Ossie Davis put it, showing “our best face,” to the white world.

A particularly illuminating example of the kind of discourse in which Penelope participates is Reid-Brinkle’s study of Essence magazine’s chatboards in response to the publication’s campaign against images of Black women in hip hop videos. While
Penelope’s judgment and attempted “protection” of lower class Black women is shaped around behavioral and styling choices, the discourses of the chatboards reflect similar tendencies towards discipline and polarities of Black female performance in terms of excess. The excess these chatboard commentators take issue with is that of excessive sexuality, which they see as threatening their own bodily and psychic integrity when performed willingly by other Black women. Ironically, however, their own claims to ladyhood (or to being “queens,” as they state frequently in these conversations) are supported by the existence of the women they deride, “The ‘black lady’ can be held as the standard only if that representation can be defined in opposition to the over-sexualized, lower-class black woman, ‘the jezebel.’” Penelope’s self-conscious class performance is only made possible through first the presence, than the erasure of that which suggests lower class to her, which I would argue, is one reason she finds such discomfort in the presence of those who she recognizes as fictive kin but has constructed herself in opposition to. Melissa Harris-Perry describes the complexities of practices of fictive kinship among African Americans. Departing from many political scientists’ uncritical celebration of fictive kinship, Harris-Perry examines how it can generate exclusion and shame rather than belonging and self-esteem. A belief in fictive kinship intersecting with her purposeful self-construction alienates Penelope from these women, who she sees as dramatically apart from but somehow belonging to her. Her apparent isolation from other black people, particularly of lower class status, and her lack of deep investment in black culture, drains the fictive kinship relationship of any sense of affection, or affinity—leaving only its disciplinary features in place. Penelope’s anxiety
rises again when the white woman, who she has begun referring to as ‘Becky,’ goes to an inner-city black hair salon,

Penelope felt embarrassed to see the fat rolls on the back of her neck, the kinky balls of hair at her nape. She wondered what the blonde woman was thinking, if she considered D’Ondra typical of black women – fat and unkempt with long fake nails bloated with acrylic.\(^{197}\)

As someone who has repeatedly referred to Becky’s own “trashiness,” it is interesting that Penelope would continue to be concerned with how a woman, presumably closer in class position to the Black women she interacts with than Penelope herself, would evaluate them. We could read this as a logical fallacy in the story or as evidence of the persistent ways in which the presence of a white gaze, and black middle class hyperawareness of that gaze can shape the impulses of fictive kinship—Penelope wants to protect women who she doesn’t know and who don’t ask for or need protection from someone who, in this case at least, offers no judgment of or threat to them. Ironically, and to Penelope’s surprise and envy, the white woman with no racial kinship bonds interacts with the working class Black women quite freely, frustrating the assumption that those who identify as Black will always find themselves aligned. In the ludicrousness of Penelope’s anxiety about these women’s hairstyles, speech patterns, and fake nails, Sconiers alerts us to the disciplining effects of an overinvestment in how Black people are externally read, an overinvestment which is more shaped by the interests of the middle class subject than of those it would presume to “protect.”

Penelope’s protective impulse exemplifies Candice Jenkins theorization of the “salvific wish.” In her re-readings of several canonical African American women’s novels, Jenkins identifies the salvific wish as the desire to shield African Americans from
accusations of deviance and immorality through aggressive policing of sexuality and public behavior. According to Jenkins,

In other words, although one might identify the salvific wish as an intraracial gesture toward communal protection, it represents equally a concern with how the black community is seen interracially, observed and evaluated across racial lines.”

While Penelope’s fears about Becky’s judgment of the Black women she encounters are unfounded, we cannot ignore that the construction of Black people as deviant does have violent consequences. In the larger world the white gaze and white power do matter, and certain representations of blackness are taken up by this gaze and leveraged by this power in ways that have material repercussions for Black people’s lives. This I do not dispute. But these representations of blackness are always already available for Black subjects to be caught up in and will be put to the uses that a white supremacist society desires—does that make the people who get read (in the case of this story, working class Black women) through such representational frames only as fixed objects of this gaze? They are for Penelope, but not for Becky, who enjoys a comfort and banter with the women in the hair shop that Penelope has never been able to access. Yet she desires and envies this access—even though her self-crafting has necessitated a purposeful distancing from the personal history and language which might allow it, “She took pride in the way she spoke, taking years to erase the row houses and hand-me-downs from her voice.”

The disruption of her body forces Penelope into a physical confrontation with a community she had aggressively avoided. Her fear of the disorder encountered there is propelled by shared racial identity, but also prohibits a meaningful and productive
connection to Black folks. In the acquisition of ‘proper’ speech, in her ability to satisfactorily perform neoliberal blackness while avoiding other Black people, Penelope loses something, a loss that Becky’s ease within the world makes her own vaguely aware of. For acceptability, she sacrifices her personal history and the experiential and cultural context from which more meaningful connections with those she thinks of as ‘hers’ could occur. In this vacuum, Penelope’s interaction with her fictive sisters is driven only by a desire to protect herself from their threatening performances of black femininity. As the story closes, Penelope’s interiority and protests over ownership of her body are evacuated directly in proportion to Becky’s actions to release the past; She sheds her own hair and, one by one, Penelope’s possessions. By the last line, Penelope seems to be gone, as the white woman throws away her car keys and heads off down train tracks into the unknown. This shedding of the past recalls and exaggerates Penelope’s own efforts to erase her working class roots. This abrupt, and rather depressing ending is characteristic of many of the story closings in Sconiers’ collection, a point to which I will return.

Where “Metamorphia” shows the discourse of ladyhood operating more in terms of a protective impulse towards working class dress, speech, and behavior, “Scotoma,” the second story I analyze, focuses on the attempted repression of sexuality. Sexuality, as a site through which Black people have been rendered deviant and vulnerable to abuse, is a central concern of the politics of respectability and consequently, ladyhood. The 19th century doctrine of true womanhood from which the principles of ladyhood are drawn demanded four characteristics: submission, domesticity, piety, and virtue. For Black women, for whom high levels of work force and civil society participation were
necessary and even expected, submission and domesticity were re-shaped, subverted, and often outright defied. However, piety and virtue were non-negotiable qualities that frequently went hand in hand. A primary way in which narrow personhood and the gospel of sexual restraint has been enforced for American women has been through Christian doctrine and the church, which in the nineteenth century shaped middle class life and thought. The black church has been a particularly resonant site for shaping the mores, expectations, and lives of Black women, both because of high levels of black religiosity and the political significance the black church has had for African Americans both within and outside of its walls. Even as black participation in regular church services and activities decreases along with the rest of the population, the black church continues to hold sway over values and expectations of normative sexuality.

The eighth story in Nicole Sconiers’ collection, “Scotoma,” is about a young, faithful, churchgoing young Black woman by day, pornography addict by night, who wakes up one morning with a 13-year-old porn star stuck in her eye. Keturah Jones, like Penelope in “Metamorphia,” experiences a fleshly, bodily invasion that disrupts her ladylike integrity and forces a confrontation with her racialized anxiety. A single, celibate, dedicated member of Grimes Episcopal Methodist church who prays nightly for God to deliver her a decent husband, Keturah is both a critique and a near-caricature of the figure of the lonely, husbandless Black woman alluded to by dozens of studies and media reports focused on Black women’s unmarriageability. On one level, this story seems to satirize a media culture that exaggerates and exploits reports of Black women’s loneliness through TV specials, inflammatory articles, and film. This trend in
representation is part and parcel of what I call the ‘culture of discipline,’ the attempt of black political and popular culture to correct and constrain Black women under the guise of counseling, representing, and even, protecting them. The culture of discipline bears relationship to the politics of respectability and ladyhood is part of what it seeks to produce. But I distinguish the culture of discipline as a rhetorical technique deployed through contemporary popular culture that specifically cultivates Black women as its audience by offering something that many of them desire: representation in the public sphere, entertainment, heterosexual marriage. The culture of discipline reflects itself in black male-produced and directed films which usually stigmatize professionally successful, assertive, and aggressive Black women and advocate a conservative sexuality (for example, The Best Man, Jumping the Broom, Think Like a Man, and nearly the entire range of Tyler Perry’s filmography), as well as dating and self-help books (written by men) which presume to tell clueless Black women how to get and hold a husband. Keturah is a key victim of this culture of discipline, as it manifests in the institutions of popular culture and the church. But more importantly, Keturah’s sad life and fate is a critique of how the demands of sexual reticence and heterosexual marriage, often deployed through the church, reinforces Black women’s oppression.

Keturah Jones does not seem to have a community or social life outside of her public relations job and her church. This absence of kinship and social networks is a recurrent feature of the alienating, hypercapitalist future that Sconiers imagines throughout Escape from Beckyville. The demands of individualism loosen Black women from family and community moorings but do not compensate for these losses through full
inclusion in American liberal society or through increased access to the nuclear family, which most of the women in *Escape from Beckyville* desire but fail to acquire. Keturah’s isolation (for her church ‘community’ seems to be dominated by posturing and judgment) intensifies both her dependence on an elusive future partner and her addiction—a nightly ritual of warming her sheets with her laptop as she masturbates to cheap internet porn. Unable to consciously admit her interest in pornography or to pursue this interest without shame, she refuses to purchase the films and sinks deeper into a highly polarized, guilt-ridden existence. Her identity of herself as a lady and as a godly woman won’t allow her to pursue sexual pleasure outside of heteronormative monogamy, or to understand sexuality outside of clear boundaries.

Keturah’s sad dual life is an especially vivid illustration of what sociologist Avril Clarke describes as the ‘inequality of love.’ In her qualitative study of the romantic, sexual, and family formation choices of middle class, heterosexual Black women, Clarke argues, “love (like money) is unequally distributed along specific social group lines.” Clarke examines the data demonstrating inverse relationship between Black women’s educational and income attainment and childbearing next to real Black women’s narration of their experiences and choices, showing that higher class status does not necessarily give Black women access to the marriage and family outcomes that they desire. Clarke distinguishes between the causes of low fertility among higher class women of different races, finding that whereas white and Hispanic women delay childbearing purposely to achieve career objectives, Black women delay it because of the different value accorded to sex and childbearing outside of marriage. Looking at a
range of practices and choices around sexuality, such as Black families’ sexual socialization of girl children and middle class Black women’s utilization of birth control and abortion, she finds a recurring concern that restrains Black middle class women from acknowledging themselves as actively sexual beings or considering parenting in an arrangement outside of heterosexual marriage—their hyperawareness of the images of Black women as pathologically sexual and fertile. According to Clarke,

These women’s need to create alternate representations—to be different from the ways others represent them—is also related to the fact that black women confront a symbolic structure in which the stories that are told about them connect their “notorious” sexual immorality and “excessive” fertility to their inferior outcomes in other areas of life (for example poverty, poor sexual and reproductive health).  

Finding that Black women with college degrees are actually overrepresented in abortion rates (in comparison to similarly educated white and Latina women and less educated Black women), and interviewing Black women about their reproductive health choices, Clarke finds that they actually fail to consistently use birth control because the long periods of celibacy incurred by marriage inequality make the continual use of birth control challenging, but also because planning for contraception before nonmarital sex would mean acknowledging that they are sexual beings (emphasis mine). So, ironically, the concern with representation creates the conditions for Black middle class women to put themselves at greater risk for sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. Black middle class women are then much more likely to abort their pregnancies because they are more likely to live and work in interracial environments where the stereotypes about Black women reflect upon their treatment, opportunities, and esteem, “abortion is most prevalent at the intersection of low racial and high educational
status because it finds its greatest use on bodies that are highly vulnerable to racially stigmatizing non-marital childbearing and among minds most steeped in the rhetoric and symbols that construct femininities and motherhood as elite.”

I conduct this extended discussion of Clarke to prove this point: the environment that shapes Black women’s sexual and reproductive choices is as constructed by structural racism and cultural narratives as it is by any kind of morality. Though Clarke does not specifically address the role of religion in such decision-making, the sexual demands of ladyhood, concerned as they are with stereotypes and interracial perception dovetail with the patriarchal conservatism of black church culture, which is at least obliquely and at times explicitly more stringent in demanding sexual purity from women and girls than from men and boys. In church doctrine, women are expected to adhere to first century sexual norms exhibited in the Bible, which demanded virtue for women while not admonishing men for their multiple wives and occasional dalliances with prostitutes. Church doctrine and the culture of discipline tend to present the values of sexual purity and the attainment of heterosexual marriage as if they are stable and independent of structural and cultural forces. Therefore, women are compelled to fix themselves, to pray harder, to serve more in the institution of the church, as they are also challenged to combat stereotype with their very bodies in interracial workplaces and neighborhoods. As these standards of sexual purity are impossible to maintain, and as they are largely preoccupied with others’ perceptions of Black women’s public behavior, privacy is used to still be sexual while managing stigma. But sexuality engaged under such conditions often incurs additional risks. In Avril’s interviews and data analysis,
these risks take the form of unplanned pregnancies. In “Scotoma,” such multi-directional pressures drive Keturah towards the aberrant behavior of sleeping and masturbating next to her computer and obsessively searching the internet for more free pornography, including tease films featuring an underage girl.

I do not read Keturah’s behavior as aberrant because it involves pornography. My work is very much informed by black feminist cultural critics such as LaMonda Horton Stallings, Jennifer Nash and Mireille Miller-Young, who all critique more traditional black feminist readings of sexual culture and subjection and propose the productivity of prioritizing pleasure and self-expression. Nash and Young both take on the troubling territory of racialized pornography. While they both acknowledge the structural constraints that Black laborers in pornography operate within and the narrow range of roles available, Nash and Young are willing to explore these sites as important ones of potential self-expression, agency, and subject formation. According to Miller-Young,

Because black women “whores” have been written out of discourses of “the black community” or have been focused on only as the problems of contemporary black femininity, we are missing an opportunity to understand and illuminate the choices and self-articulations young black women today are making about their sexualities.212

Keturah is utterly unable to make any kind of self-articulation about her sexuality. Acting in accordance to the mores imposed by the church, black community discourses of good women’s behavior, and the burden to disprove stereotypes, she maintains a strict boundary between public and private space. From the drastic difference in her behavior in public and private, we can see that her fear of expressing sexuality is not primarily a fear of God (who, presumably, can see her wherever she is) but of public judgment. The
repression of her unfulfilled desires causes them to manifest not as an open, perfectly valid curiosity, but as isolating addiction.

In *Escape from Beckyville*, bodily disruptions manifest as freak outcomes of characters’ unvoiced apprehensions and desires. In “Metamorphia” Penelope’s preoccupation with escaping from blackness and her awareness of the white gaze places her within a white body that performs the kind of blackness she so feared. In “Scotoma,” Kenturah’s unwillingness to explore pornography as a legitimate site through which to explore ecstasy and self-fashioning reduces it to the level of obsessive pathology. Her pornography addiction, particularly her preoccupation with the films of the thirteen-year-old ‘Little Lourdes’ ends up with the image of Little Lourdes actually implanting herself in her eye and in her life, “‘Jesus,’ Keturah said, slapping her palms against her eyelids. When she removed her hands, the girl was still there, on the right side of a queen-sized mattress that no other body had indented in six years.”

For days Little Lourdes plagues and haunts Keturah, appearing in sexual positions, often in the act of brazen masturbating. Whereas before Keturah could close her computer and safely perform the other half of her dual existence, the occupation of her eye forces the saturation of her addiction into her everyday life. Rather than only seeing this as some kind of supernatural or psychological comeuppance for Keturah’s addiction, I read Little Lourdes as an expression of one possibility that Keturah never entertains, an expression of lesbian desire. In this, I am informed by Barbara Smith’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as a lesbian novel. Smith identifies several passages rife with romantic and erotic imagery about the relationship of two black female friends, even
complementary fairytale daydreams, in which Sula rides a white horse while Nel waits in bed for a prince. Though Smith does not claim that the relationship between Nel and Sula is overtly sexual, she suggests that it contains erotic potential, a potential that must be contained and redirected by heteropatriarchal norms. Similarly, heteropatriarchal assumptions shape the way critics and readers, (and even authors themselves, as Smith also does not suggest that Toni Morrison’s intent was to write a lesbian novel, and Sconiers’ work features no openly queer characters) engage with texts, preventing them from connecting the language and imagery to a text’s most likely conclusions. Had Keturah’s character been male, an attraction to Little Lourdes would be assumed.

The specific kind of pornography in which Little Lourdes appears indicates why Keturah might be drawn to this figure. As Keturah describes, “Little Lourdes was a tease. She reclined on a couch, legs spread. Her hands groped beneath the elastic of her white cotton panties but whether to pleasure herself or protect her vulva, Keturah couldn’t tell.” Much of the media that Keturah watches involves intercourse between the actors onscreen. While allowing herself to be stimulated by these scenes, Keturah is still able to see herself as apart from them, a passive observer. But the Little Lourdes films serve to involve the spectator by delaying fulfillment of a sexual act with another character onscreen. Little Lourdes connects with the viewer, and her films deny penetration, suggesting only possibility, “Right before the clip ended, a naked man emerged from the bedroom and squatted between the girl’s thighs. Then the video faded to black.” One might assume that such a performance is designed to call the viewer to imagine him or herself as the man who steps between Little Lourdes’s thighs at the end of the film, to
enact the promised possibility, whether through penetration or another type of sexual act. We can see Keturah’s frantic search for films of Little Lourdes featuring penetration as simply an interest in more graphic forms of stimulation, or we can read it as her effort to avoid the tease film’s ‘call to action,’ to prevent the unthinkable possibility that she herself wishes to ‘complete’ the scene. Keturah struggles both to express and underplay this desire in her desperate appeal to a prayer partner to help exorcise Little Lourdes from her life,

“There’s this one…performer. I can’t get her out of my head.”

“Her?” Doreen frowned as if this admission were more disturbing than a porn addiction.

“Doreen, you know I’m strictly into men,” Keturah assured her.218

It is noteworthy that in a conversation between two religious women about one of them being haunted by a character from a child pornographic film, it is the possibility of attraction to another female that raises alarm. Keturah feels a greater need to assure her prayer partner of her heterosexuality than of her sanity. But non-heteronormative desire is a violation of ladyhood, particularly the good black churchwoman brand of ladyhood to which Keturah ascribes. Even Lisa Thompson, in her theorization of the black lady, seems to hold that lesbianism and the image of middle class respectability cannot coexist. According to Thompson,

In the struggle for female sexual empowerment, heterosexual middle-class black women occupy a unique position. If, with their relatively privileged social status, they share the burden of discussing sexuality with lesbian, bisexual, and working-class women—whose bodies are constantly sexualized and suspect—they form a fuller chorus that can more effectively contest stereotypes.”219
Thompson seems to suggest that the normative, assumed heterosexuality of Black middle class women can form a counterbalance against images of working class, poor, and sexually non-normative women in providing a fuller, less stigmatized picture of black female sexuality. The women that she identifies as being most likely to be defined as black ladies must be sexually normative not only in their behavior, but in their choice of partners and identification. While Thompson clearly objects to the constraints of ladyhood, she seems most concerned with the challenges it presents to middle class women. While this chapter also focuses on this constraint in the lives of characters in Escape from Beckyville, it reads this restraint in a larger context, that of black political culture. Rather than reproduce the polarity between ‘ladies’ and the ‘others’ whose personhood alone cannot contest stereotype, I wish to point out how queer sexuality is such a frightening prospect that community members experiencing a sexual crisis cannot expect comfort or understanding in the places most marked as safe. In fact, it is the ‘safe’ space of the church that constructs Keturah’s prison, a space that the Little Lourdes figure seems intent on invading.

Sexual tension is rife in the initial encounters with Little Lourdes, as the spectre frolics around unclothed next to Keturah, tempting her while expressing all of the brazen sexuality that Keturah tries to resist. By going to church with Keturah naked, and touching herself while listening to the sermon, the figure of Little Lourdes calls into question the division between the sacred and profane. In a space that attempts to deny the body, rendering it as sinful clay to be denied or controlled, this presence calls attention to the realities, functions, and needs of the body—an unclothed, dirty, fungible, desiring
body that Keturah desires both for itself and for the freedom it seems to exhibit, a freedom that she does not possess. This blend of desire and disgust recalls Penelope’s reaction to Becky’s possession of her body. Sconiers does not give a scientific explanation for how these possessions happen, and it might be easy to read them as metaphor, but I would rather offer my own hypothesis of the technology that makes them possible—the protagonists self-eviscerations. Though Sconiers does not reference African spirituality in a way that is common in the work of other Black female science fiction writers (Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, Nnedi Okorafor), the experiences of Penelope and Keturah are also readable through the technology of spiritual possession. There is something in the characters’ actions, thoughts, or energy that rendered them vulnerable to these forces, that in some way reflect their own suppressed desires. Perhaps we can read both Becky and Little Lourdes as taking residence in the space Penelope and Keturah excavated to meet the demands of ladyhood—Penelope’s personal history and former class position, and Keturah’s sexuality and sexual agency. Rather than receiving the message these spirits come to impart—which might mean to engage and merge with these alternative femininities, Penelope and Keturah judge them and resist.

I repeatedly refer to the Little Lourdes that occupies Keturah’s eye as a figure or spectre to call attention to the fact that somewhere in the world, there is a real, victimized young girl being called on to perform this fantasy of prepubescent desire, to provide coerced sexual labor for more privileged others. Towards the end of the story, Keturah begins to come to this realization. Her lust, disgust, and fear dissipate, as Little Lourdes becomes more humanized, “The other plait had escaped its white ribbon, and her locks,
finally freed, trailed behind her like a veil. She was beautiful." The piece concludes with Ketura’s apparent suicide, when she slices into her own eye with a piece of her computer screen, apparently to free Little Lourdes, or the exploited child known as Little Lourdes from a life of sexualized abuse,

When the shard punctured her eye, there was a jolt of light in her left temple and then blackness…There, on the floor of the unlit closet, she felt the hum of the automatic garage door opening below her. Blood tickled her ear, pooling beneath her neck. The last thing Keturah saw was the girl bending over her, and something warm and scaly pressed against her cheek.222

This ending leaves many questions. It seems to imply an act of rescue, after Keturah realizes her participation in the objectification and abuse of a child. Keturah slices her eye to free Little Lourdes, who touches Keturah’s face gratefully and escapes (through the garage door?) into the world, freed from all of the eyes that consume her and now able to exist as more than a prepubescent fantasy. In this sense, the story could be read within the anti-pornography position of some black feminist criticism.223 In this perspective, pornography is always a distortion of true eroticism, and Keturah’s depressing fate might be read in the context of her turn to an essentially degrading form of sexual satisfaction. That Little Lourdes is cut from the eye represents her rescue from a visual culture that is inherently violent to women of color.224

However, in my reading, it is not pornography or the plight of racialized women’s bodies in the visual realm that is the problem, but the fixation upon heterosexual marriage as the only possible response to Keturah’s loneliness and frustration. There were so many options for Keturah besides a lonely, bloody, brutal death. She could have used her credit card without shame and found some high-quality feminist porn that did not rely upon
child labor, that helped her to identify and explore her own desires. She could have explored relationships with men and/or women without burdening them with the objective of marriage, and experimented with various forms of monogamy and non-monogamy to find the version of companionship and mutual sexual pleasure that worked for her. She could have gotten involved with organizations, friendships, and activities outside of her church, had piety and marriage been destabilized as the only things that would give value to her life. Ladyhood and godliness foreclose the possibilities of a more balanced, guiltless, and open engagement of pornography, an exploration of her lesbian desires, or the creation of an alternative form of community outside of liberal individualism and the nuclear family. The efforts to distance themselves from and manage external stigma, rather than confront it and deconstruct its logics, constrain Penelope and Keturah’s lives to the narrow space within externally-imposed, internally maintained boundaries. Unable to thrive within this space, they both, in some form, disappear. This is similar to many closings in this collection, that allow the defeat of their Black female protagonists. Perhaps these disturbing endings are an aspect of the horror genre that is part of the family of speculative fictions that Escape from Beckyville draws on. But I believe another reading is available—that the feminized liberal individualism that these lives exemplify is a personal and political dead end.

While I chose to center my analysis on Metamorphia and Scotoma, those that most clearly elucidate a specifically intraracial politics, the themes in these stories reverberate across all of the stories in the collection. The culture of discipline is particularly salient in stories such as “Happy Black Bitches Club,” and “The Death of
Common Women” in which, respectively, Black women are criminalized for their anger and for not meeting societal standards of physical attractiveness. Another major recurring theme is loneliness. None of the central characters are in a romantic or sexual relationship, and only one has a child. One features a woman so desperate for affection and a man to have on her arm and lend extra value to her existence, she orders a white android to be her boyfriend. None of the women seem to have mamas, aunties, friends that they regularly hang out with or talk to on the phone. Perhaps this is symptomatic of the short story form, which only allows so much space for the fleshing out of the characters’ lives. But I choose to read this as a critique on neoliberal individualism, in which careers demand geographic mobility, substantive (not just representative) forms of solidarity are read as unnecessary and regressive, and family and community moorings are loosened even as people are simultaneously pushed, as the state withdraws, to lean on the family for support.

There are some moments in Beckyville where we see communalism, in the collective bonding and resistance of Black women. In “Here Come the Janes,” Black women find themselves pursued by vampirish white women who become stronger from the theft and consumption of black hair. Balding and fed up, Black women who seem to have previously been isolated from one another gather in a black hair salon to plot a resistance. This space is notable; just as hair salons have frequently served as spaces of bonding, education, and socialization of Black women, they have also served as sites for politics and community organizing. The women cut their hair in a ritual fashion, drawing strength from one another and contributing various supplies and skills to the effort.225
a scene that seems intended to be reminiscent of the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles, the women set out armed with their hair traps and homemade firebombs, only they head to wealthy, white-occupied areas, targeting the places that symbolize the upward distribution of resources in neoliberal life,

Beverly Hills was our first target. The area stank of perverted glamour, a musk both feared and desired. It dripped from couture boutiques, cosmetics stores, and designer jewelry shops that dotted Robertson Boulevard. Before the Janes disrupted my life, I rarely ventured to this side of town. It seemed that even the mannequins with their pouty sneers and flowing yellow locks had more right to be there than I did. But now, in the middle of the night, we sprinkled strands along the sidewalk, while priestesses performing last rites.²²⁶

In a conscious reversal of some of the major themes of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprisings (middle class, educated women rather than young, under-employed men as the major agents, the Janes’ attacks rather than state violence as the instigating effect, the taking the rebellion to the streets of Beverly Hills rather than containing it to South LA) these women gather to violently protest the Janes’ theft and consumption of their hair, which actually represents neoliberalism’s consumption and use of their difference. The women successfully destroy several of the Janes but in the police chase one of their cars is totaled. The principal character of this story, Thessie, ends up in hospital bed, alone, under arrest and face to face with a grinning white nurse holding a rattail comb.²²⁷ In “The Happy Black Bitches Club,” black women, whose expressions of anger have been outlawed, gather together in underground speakeasies where they can “go off” freely. Hesitant at first, the protagonist Nia goes to one of these places, which emboldens her to resist the anger laws. But when she goes too far in her radicalism, she is expelled from the happy black bitches club and captured by the police.²²⁸ While I see the palpable
loneliness of the Beckyville stories as a pointed critique at neoliberal society, I wonder about Sconiers’ refusal to imagine more enduring black feminine communities. Is the abrupt decimation of these collective experiments an expression of Twilight Zone-style horror, or a failure of black political imagination? This is a notable weakness in this collection that, for me remains irreconcilable with the text’s capacity for critique. Though victory may not have been possible for most of Beckyville’s protagonists, I wonder if Sconiers could have gestured to some kind of vision outside of the boundaries that so tightly contained them. As a near-future extrapolation, Escape from Beckyville invokes enough estrangement for us to look more critically at our own world, but it stops far short of imagining an otherwise.

Whereas Escape from Beckyville exemplifies extreme personal costs for middle class Black women’s self-repression, they also demonstrate the political stakes—how ladyhood provides for the discipline and exploitation of less powerful women of color. The characters’ investments in representation and respectability, as exemplified through their preoccupations with beauty, class performance, restraint, and aspirations towards the nuclear family are inadequate to the challenges of their own survival and to social justice now—or in the future. But these characters do not aspire to these standards in a vacuum; ladyhood is an intraracial practice with a long history of limiting black politics’ radical impulses. Black ladyhood has frequently been used to support the simplification and masculinization of narratives of social movements, as women such as Rosa Parks are retrospectively made into silent, respectable figures while their own complexity and the labor of thousands of women inappropriate to such figuring is made invisible. The kind
of politics created by the distorted narratives of charismatic patriarchs and the silenced ladies continue to stifle the voices and concerns of the most marginalized members of Black communities. The elevation of Black women to the pedestal often necessitates a silencing of their gendered claims for justice, while masking the intra-racial exclusion and violence to which they are subjected. Through loyalty, ladyhood, and silence, Black women are continually challenged to meet not only the inequity of the larger society but the patriarchy of black culture with nothing but the power of their own ‘worth.’
Octavia Butler is probably the best known and celebrated Black writer of science fiction, and unique in that her work is energetically claimed and read in both African American literary criticism and the science fiction canon. Butler grew up as an avid reader of American science fiction, participated actively in the mainstream SF community, and used its institutions to hone and disseminate her craft. I emphasize this to remind us of Butler’s embeddedness in the science fiction institution, therefore her likelihood of very intentionally adapting set tropes and conventions of that institution. Growing up reading, as Butler says, the best and worst of science fiction, she was thoroughly grounded in one the central tropes of the Golden Age: human-alien encounter. She readily discusses her frustration with the ease of these encounters (particularly on the side of humans, often portrayed as superior and victorious) and her desire to complicate such stories in her own fiction. Butler sought to elevate her brand of science fiction from much of the pulp she cut her creative teeth on, both through language and with the complexity with which she treated SF’s most treasured themes. Her ‘monsters’ (as I call the beings she creates in works about extraterrestrials, such as Bloodchild and Xenogenesis) are not single-dimensional soulless predators, pathetic inferior creatures, or thinly disguised projections of human difference and racial anxieties. Rather, they are complete entities: sensitive, creative, intellectual, deeply feeling, and gentle. But, like other alien monsters, they are essentially bound to a biologically determined purpose and instinct that renders them dangerous to and dependent upon other beings. Instead of
aligning readers totally with human heroes in these interactions, Butler muddies the waters of power, will, and consent, as humans seem at once repelled and seduced, violated and nurtured by their reactions to these beings.

Butler’s revision of the alien encounter is also driven by her consistent preoccupation with the complexities of power and subjection—a preoccupation that, I argue in this chapter, is largely informed by her concerns with black political discourse. In discussing her novel *Kindred*, a speculative contemporary narrative of slavery published eight years earlier, Butler critiques Black Power era postures towards earlier generations of African Americans who spent their lives in conditions of servitude and apparent subjection. Remembering her own unresolved feelings of shame about her mother’s employment as a maid, Butler wrote *Kindred* as a way to counter the suggestion that those subjected within systems of power who did not violently resist should be devalued, despised or held responsible for their own subjection—she wrote it to show “different kinds of courage.”*234* Butler was adamant that except for *Kindred*, her work had nothing to do with slavery and most critics read her fiction as—while depicting Black characters—not centering black experience.*235*

However, I suggest that most of Butler’s work shares in common a depiction of complicated entanglements of power, that, in some way, is informed by slavery and its long afterlife in black life and political culture. Subjection to conditions of domination has certainly been an inescapable part of black experience, which has included slavery, colonization, and continuing institutionalized racism. The perplexities of blackness are always present in Butler’s work while the specific experiences associated with blackness
might only be taken up in indirect ways. In this chapter I read Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, in which a Black woman named Lillith is chosen to mother a new race of human-alien hybrids, through a black feminist-queer theory of the grotesque. I argue that she puts tropes of science fiction and black political discourse, the gruesome alien and disruptive black femininity, respectively, into radical and uncomfortable proximity to challenge the postures and boundaries of Black Power-influenced racial politics. In opening the human body to disruption and change, but also to an empowering and queering experience through alien hybridity, Butler’s use of the grotesque proposes the rethinking of the desirability of the *black communal body*—a straight, masculinized, impenetrable being presenting its best face to the world.

Critical theories of the grotesque trouble the assignment of universal value to the concept of beauty, proposing that beauty is a Western construction—much like the concept of the human itself. The construction of beauty relies upon the suppression of and outright violence against that or those deemed to be disorderly and non-normative, much as the construction of the human has derived from a bourgeois white masculine norm that both depends upon and excludes most actual ‘humans’ in the world.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was pivotal in developing a theory of the grotesque. Observing the riotous, bawdy, performances of carnival, he proposed that the open, protuberant, excessive body (particularly its lower regions) was a direct challenge to not only the contained, classical ideal body of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but the oppressive political and societal structures to which this ideal corresponded. The development of classical thought and the oppositional culture of the carnivalesque
also correspond to the rise of humanist philosophy and the foundations for modern racism. As the carnivalesque was disciplined throughout the Enlightenment, the grotesque was deployed not just as resistance but as a tool of power, capable of naming and castigating forms of difference that were still being solidified into the modern lexicon of race and sexuality. According to visual art critic and theorist Kobena Mercer, the grotesque is “one of the primary visual languages of racism.”

The persistent fetishism of grotesque imagery of Black people as a powerful tool of racism complicates black uses and theories of the grotesque. Though performances of what could be called a carnivalesque aesthetic abound in black popular culture, these performances are often disciplined by black political and intellectual analyses concerned about the consequences of representation. Drawing on Mercer, Uri McMillan points out the link between the grotesque, humanism, and modern racism in his study of black feminist performance art’s use of the grotesque,

The genre of the grotesque is buttressed by cultural anomalies that refuse to stay within the boundaries of tautly delimited categories…the category of the grotesque is socially constructed and constantly shifting, disrupting order while pivoting away from the normal, and even from the human altogether. However, when the difference that is perceived becomes racial difference, the disorder posed by the grotesque is amplified and, as history suggests, dealt with more severely.

Here, McMillan recognizes the oppositional, disruptive potential of the grotesque, but also the violent relationship between it and racialization. The frequency in which all blackness is already read as grotesque suggests why the idea of using the grotesque as a productive space or strategy is a vexed one for black studies. It is particularly perplexing for black feminist studies, which have often been concerned with how the construction of
black women’s bodies as grotesque threatens black access to humanity and citizenship. Just as some black feminist scholars caution against a wholesale embrace of posthumanity, reminding us of the contribution black critical theorists have made to generating different conceptualizations of the human\textsuperscript{240}, black feminist critics have focused more upon redefining rather than disengaging from the concept of beauty. For example, in “The Batty Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body,” Janelle Hobson traces the history of cultural representations of Black women’s bodies, particularly their buttocks as grotesque. She places contemporary representations of and reactions to Black women’s bodies in the context of the treatment of Sarah Baartman and her successors exhibited as the Venus Hottentot in Europe as exotic, sexualized monstrosities that obviously aroused sexual fascination while being placed outside of the boundaries of feminine beauty. Hobson uses this discussion as context for the artistic representations, the ‘recovery’ work of artists such as Carla Williams, Coreen Simpson, and the performers in Urban Bush Women to unmirror the black female body—rescue it from its overdeterminations by an exoticizing and distorting white gaze and provide a healing vision through which Black women can see themselves as beautiful. While Hobson briefly discusses the subversive potential of the grotesque and purports to use a disability studies framework (which would suggest an investment in subverting normativity and beauty), the essay’s focus on redefining the black female body as beautiful (which, she points out, has been associated with hierarchy and imposed values) leaves the grotesque in its status as undesirable, a realm from which black women’s bodies must be rescued.\textsuperscript{241}
While a reticence towards a progressive theory of the grotesque in black feminist studies is understandable, I am interested in unmooring black feminist thought from black representational politics. If the grotesque can be used against Black women, can it not also be used by them, albeit in contextualized and complicated ways? If we see beauty as a production of Western thought and history’s impulses towards categorization and violence, then should we aspire to it at all? Rather than an oppositional resistance in which black versions or revisions of classical ideals are submitted in response to images of monstrosity and pathology, the grotesque can be used as a productive space outside of these diametrically opposed logics. Though carnival is also a method of satirizing political order syncretized with Africana religious and performance practices and deployed throughout the diaspora, my reading of the grotesque departs from Bakhtin’s focus on the carnivalesque as its major expression. If a particularly black conception of humanity developed through the attempts of Black people to admit themselves to the category of human, this conception has sought restoration of the integrity: bodily, familial, and otherwise, excavated by enslavement and racial genocide. Therefore, a black feminist grotesque might resist the tropes of healing, reconciliation, wholeness, reveling in the uneasy but radical space of abjection, fragmentation, porousness, and non-closing.

As a visual example of black feminist grotesque and an appropriate counterpart to the disturbing and evocative effects of Octavia Butler’s writing, I offer the artwork of Wangeci Mutu. Mutu’s collages show recognizably black women in arrangements and configurations that might be called grotesque: cyborgian figures with hairless, skull-like...
heads whose absent or amputee limbs grow into various kinds of organic and built matter. Unlike the carnivalesque, this grotesque is difficult to appropriate, or to read as celebration excavated of social critique. Combing images such as adult film stars and severed limbs, these artworks are also nearly impossible to read within a representational politics that looks for recovery from the traumatic field of the visual. 242 Black feminist criticism that takes on Mutu’s work must necessarily depart from a traditional reading of representation and of the grotesque. Just as Mutu characterizes her work as a way to navigate the tensions between “resilience and compliance, agency and victimization” 243, Octavia Butler’s fiction does similar political and cultural work.

Using Mutu’s collages as a framework for reading Butler’s Kindred, Tiffany Barber argues against the more common readings of slave narrative through a logic of recovery and healing. She argues, rather, for an approach called ‘transgressive disfigurement,’ a confrontation of repulsion, of fragmentation, and of difference that destabilizes the binary oppositions of trauma and recovery, slavery and freedom, ugliness and beauty, subjection and resistance. 244 Butler’s work is continually concerned with muddying the waters between the shores of binaries, with revealing the interdependent construction of all that the popular discourse of black politics would like to keep apart. In Kindred transgressive disfigurement is depicted through the loss of Dana’s arm which represents the irreconcilability of slavery, in Xenogenesis it is the disfigurement of the human body through alien hybridity, which presents both horrifying and productive possibilities. Just as Mutu’s collages show the black female body as powerfully (but not necessarily defeatedly) undone, Butler suggests possibilities that are always in flux.
because of the willingness to defer wholeness. In this chapter, I read Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* through a black feminist theory of the grotesque to contest post-black power moment’s constructions of the black communal body. By black communal body I refer to the construction of Black people as belonging to one contained, integral, and closed unit, with a monolithic history and interests. I call this idea a body, not just a community, to call attention to the importance of physical black bodies, particularly their sexuality and reproductive capacity in imagining the concerns and interests of the group.

The Black Power Movement, which gathered strength tangentially (rather than after or in clear opposition to) the Civil Rights Movement activated already existing black nationalisms in more visible and confrontational ways. What distinguishes Black Power nationalism as a distinct formation within the long Civil Rights Movement is a rhetorical shift emphasizing confrontation, autonomy, and solidarity that managed to span across a multitude of preexisting and new political alliances, organizing forms, and strategies, from alliances with white radical students and Third World liberation movements, to electoral politics and capitalist enterprise. Because the actual organizing, activities, and theories produced within what we call the Black Power Movement and black nationalisms are rich, plural, and complex, I offer the *black power moment* as a way to describe those resonances that tend to preserve the movement’s visual imagery and rhetorical content over its diverse and more substantive critiques, priorities, and programs. In other words, the popular memorialization of Black Power and its influence and manifestation in black political discourse today reflects its rhetorical style and posture over its programs or critiques.
A central constituting element of the black power moment’s rhetorical shift was a framing of empowerment as a reclamation of the emasculated black man\textsuperscript{246}, from not only white supremacist violence, but the perceived timidity of bourgeoisie uplift projects and Civil Rights liberalism.\textsuperscript{247} In their objection to the method of nonviolent resistance and the incremental and class-biased change offered by liberal reform, Black male activists of nationalist organizations used a vividly sexual imagery and rhetoric to feminize the Civil Rights ‘Old Guard.’ In the process, they premised Black Power as a reclamation of interrupted masculinity. Many Black Power thinkers also took their cues from the Nation of Islam ideology, which premised the building of a strong black nation upon a capitalist, benevolent patriarchy in which women were to serve as helpmates, homekeepers, and breeders.\textsuperscript{248} In what could be considered a science fictional text itself, Elijah Muhammad claimed that the creation of the white race was due to a mad scientist’s genetic engineering and proposed that the control of Black women’s autonomy and childbearing was essential to the restoration of black greatness.

In the black power moment’s genealogy of the black communal body, slavery is seen as a site of pollution that rendered the black communal body impure, particularly through its prohibitions from practicing normative gender roles. So, though the presentation of the progress of the race as the success of its manhood (often put forward in the form of a handful of charismatic, heteronormative, disproportionately visible black male leaders) is a recurring feature through African American history and social movements, in the black power moment manhood was increasingly identified with a more confrontational rhetoric and politics, as well as an attractive discourse of self-
reliance rather than appeal. While the heteronormative family has always been privileged, the black power moment imbues a new framing—the heteronormative family (an exception might be some black nationalists’ advocacy for polygamy) was revolutionary, for it resisted the effort of the white supremacist power structure to stigmatize and destroy it—particularly through the “castration,” literally, economically, and figuratively of the black male. According to these logics, where the violence and indignities suffered by Black men tend to be seen as representative of all Black people, women’s specific experiences or claims are read as distracting, and those of gay, queer, and trans people as entirely alien and external to black communal interests.249 This phenomenon has been critiqued often through black feminist criticism of the archetypes of ‘sapphire,’ ‘matriarch,’ or ‘Black Malinche.’250 In short, I argue that the black power moment constructs the black communal body as a whole, restored, impenetrable, and essentially ‘straight’ body, a construction that is actually counterintuitive to Black people’s historic tolerance and fluidity around gender roles, queer sexuality and non-nuclear family formation. Though Black women are essential to the reproduction of the black communal body, they tend to be read as disruptive to it when they express autonomy—particularly in the context of publicly drawing attention to their own needs, labor, abuse at the hands of Black men, gendered experiences—or when they challenge men in their aspiration to or achievement of leadership roles.

Notably, Dawn’s protagonist is named for a figure found in rabbinical literature; Lillith was allegedly the first wife of the biblical first man Adam. After refusing to lie underneath Adam, Lillith was banished to become the mother of demons and replaced by
The myth of Lillith has been taken up by several authors in feminist science fiction, who claim Lilith as a proto feminist heroine and draw her interiority in imaginative ways. The myth of Lilith as a traitor to humanity shows the resonance of the threat that self-determining women pose across different histories and cultures. But this threat is intensified within black political discourse, which operates in a context of centuries of genocidal conditions faced by African American people. Broader cultural traditions that vilify women as a source of downfall collide with histories of the sexual subjugation of Black women to produce tropes of black femininity that allegedly undermine the integrity of the black communal body. A few authors have made the connection between the myth of Lillith and these tropes. Michele Osherow claims “Butler’s Lilith seems representative of the black matriarch, particularly in her negotiation for stability and survival in a foreign world.” While I recognize the same points of connection as Osherow—in seeing *Dawn* as the intersection of broader cultural and specifically black mythologies of womanhood—I hesitate at her reading of the Oankali-human encounter as analogous to American slavery.

My reading practice for this text departs from criticism that primarily relies on allegory or metaphor to read science/speculative fiction, as if events and situations are always directly equivalent to real life. Though some analogizing and comparison is unavoidable, the reading of sci-fi as strictly allegory does violence to the worldbuilding process that may be informed by concerns about the real world, that may involve some extrapolation, but that, importantly, surpasses the boundaries of material reality to imagine disruptively new arrangements, relationships, and societies. I am particularly
thinking of the work Butler does in her monster stories. If we read Lillith, as Osherow
does, as analogous to enslaved women, then it is difficult to not read the Oankali as
representative of white slaveholders or colonizers—which, given complexities of Oankali
technology, sociality, and worldview (which is in many ways oppositional to those of the
imperial West), is clearly inappropriate. Estrangement is an important part of the reading
practice and effect of science fiction that many who work on this literature from within
traditional literary studies fail to consider thoroughly. The estrangement of science
fiction, hopefully, trains the eye to see the real world differently, not necessarily to make
direct comparisons between the vaguely and disturbingly familiar constructed world but
to make the ‘real’ world strange as well, to denaturalize and defamiliarize its unjust
arrangements.\footnote{253} I read science fiction texts not so much as metaphors, but as signifying
texts that hint, trouble, comment on what we think of as reality, that play with ideas that
might then be processed and reconsidered in the context of black politics.

Osherow’s reading of Lillith as matriarch also conflates the \textit{figure} of the
matriarch with the actual history of enslaved women. Rather than an actual historical
actor or a clearly identifiable personhood with a stable set of characteristics, I rather think
of the matriarch as a reservoir for anxieties about black female autonomy, non-nuclear
family formation, and frustration masculinity. To avoid the kind of slippage that I think
critical strategies using singular archetypes (such as mammy, matriarch, jezebel)
engender, I refer instead to \textit{disruptive black femininity}. Octavia Butler’s \textit{Dawn} continues
and expands upon \textit{Kindred}'s concerns with black power moment postures towards
histories of subjection through a grotesque assemblage of alien bodies and disruptive
black femininity. This assemblage reveals the penetrability of both humanity and the black communal body and hints towards disturbingly radical possibilities for affinity and sociality.

In this chapter, I first establish that the grotesque visage of the Oankali offer opportunities for different ways of being. I then examine the ways in which gender, race, and sexuality especially enable Lillith’s legibility as a traitorous figure. Next, I illustrate how the central tension in the human-Oankali encounter, which Lillith is seen as enabling, is the queering of integral masculinity. I ultimately argue that perhaps we can read the outcome of *Dawn* not only as Lillith’s capitulation to more powerful forces, but as an embrace of the possibilities that grotesque monstrosity might represent. Returning to the ‘real world’, I suggest how reading *Dawn* might make ‘strange’ the recurring themes and boundaries of black political discourse.

*Dawn* opens with Lillith Ayapo awakening in an empty room, 250 years after humans have destroyed Earth and most life on it through nuclear war. She meets the Oankali, a biologically and technically advanced species that has spent the last two centuries restoring the Earth and studying the handful of survivors that they retrieved from a devastated world. The Oankali are one example of Octavia Butler’s take on the grotesque alien. Upon first sight of her first Oankali guide, Jdaya, Lillith slowly becomes aware of just how alien the Oankali are:

She was not afraid. She had gotten over being frightened by “ugly” faces long before her capture. The unknown frightened her. The cage she was in frightened her. She preferred becoming accustomed to any number of ugly faces to remaining in her cage.

“All right,” she said. “Show me.”
The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose—no bulge, no nostrils—just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over—pale gray skin, darker gray on its head that grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across its eyes that she wondered how the creature could see…The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed—a kind of natural tracheostomy. \textsuperscript{254}

Having experienced nuclear war and, undoubtedly, witnessing the deformities of war injuries and radiation, Lillith is not initially afraid of the potential ugliness of the aliens who hold her. She recognizes beauty as constructed, unstable, something that can be destroyed by violence so cannot possess moral value. She takes a rather scientific interest in Jdaya’s anatomy when she is able to relate it, however unappealing it is, to something recognizable human. After all, humans have hair, and throats, and some have tracheostomies. The effect of the grotesque deepens, for Lillith and for the reader, as we realize just how non-human the Oankali are:

“Oh god,” she whispered. And the hair—whatever-it-was—moved. Some of it seemed to blow towards her as though in a wind—though there was no stirring of air in the room…Medusa. Some of the “hair” writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions. \textsuperscript{255}

The unruly, independent movement of Jdaya’s ‘hair’ is what shocks and appalls Lillith most, alerting her to the depth of his difference from humans. Jdaya quickly explains that the hairs are not separate beings, but necessary sensory organs that allow him to perceive everything on multiple, interconnected sensory levels. This reminds us that bodies are shaped by physical conditions for particular biological purposes, and that aesthetics about bodies are a reflection of human values shaped by specific cultural contexts. Lillith’s reaction to the presence of these tentacles points to how Butler’s use of
the grotesque differs from the Bakhtian, carnivalesque aesthetic: it is chilling rather than boisterous, and rather than utilizing the earthiness of the human “bottom,” (the bottom regions of the body), it references animality to create an utterly alien and disorienting effect. Here we see that the grotesque is not just about the visual, as nothing about the actual physical look of Jdaya changes between Lillith’s original impression of him and her realization that his ‘hair’ is actually tentacles—what changes is his familiarity as something somewhat like her, his creatureness, his body’s possession of unruly elements that appear to function with a life of their own. It is this creatureness, and the prospect of becoming a creature herself, that horrifies Lillith once she learns the Oankali’s ultimate objective, to not only restore humanity to the Earth but to change it irrevocably, through a “trade” of Oankali and human genetic material. Jdaya explains this as necessary to both Oankali and human survival. For the Oankali, interspecies trade is the product of their continual biological and technological advancement, and to stop would be the end of their existence. For humans, it will allegedly neutralize the genetic flaw that prompted the destruction of the Earth—the combination of intelligence and a hierarchical impulse:

You are hierarchical. That’s the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It’s a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all…That was like ignoring cancer.256

Jdaya attempts to explain to Lillith that humans, as well, are already creatures, whose genetic instincts threaten the survival of all life on Earth. He introduces Lillith to an alternative to what human existence had become in the Oankali way of life. The Oankali seem to live within rather than aboard a large organic spacecraft, in tree-like
structures that grow from it, much like the plant life that provides their diet. Lillith is forbidden to eat or kill animals while with the Oankali; the nutritious vegan diet they prepare for and enjoy with Lillith and other surviving humans reflect a holistic, symbiotic relationship with their environment which is both natural and constructed.\textsuperscript{257}

Lillith is charged with awakening and orienting another group of humans to the task of creating a new community on earth. But she has another, more troubling mission—to acclimate these humans to the condition and implications of the Oankali genetic trade, without which humans will be unable to reproduce. Both missions, but particularly the second, put Lillith immediately at odds with the people she must lead, most of whom are determined to maintain their bodily, humanly integrity at all costs. Their resistance is intensified by the ugliness of the Oankali, particularly the tentacles on every surface and orifice of the aliens’ bodies. This ugliness intensifies the human horror of intimate engagement and procreation with the Oankali and therefore the depth of Lilith’s perceived betrayal of mankind. But while the grotesque visage of the Oankali is a major source of human fear and hatred, it is also the very source of the sensory abilities that give the Oankali a visceral, integral, relationship to their physical world. Through their sensory organs they not only perceive but can manipulate and nourish.\textsuperscript{258} Oankali physicality is not just for the effect of horror; it is a reflection and an enabler of their way of life. It also produces their immense power, as their sensory interconnection to everything in their world allows them to manipulate matter, administer healing, and extend biological life.
Everything in the Oankali world: the earth, their ships, their bodies, their homes, is organically connected; there is no distinction between their natural and constructed environments, between organic life and technology, illustrating perfectly a process that Donna Harraway describes as articulation. Harraway explains how articulation, which is the symbiotic relationship to and communication between organic and non-organic beings, is less likely to do violence to nature than the logics of control or of salvation of the natural environment. The Oankali’s physicality reflects their recognition of their interdependence with all matter, generating a uniquely sustainable, communal, and healthy way of life. If we ascribe to the logic of the novel, in which hierarchy is humanity’s fatal flaw that has already resulted once in the Earth’s destruction, then the learning of a symbiotic process, a new way of engaging one another and the world, is a way to temper that flaw. As the Oankali achieve articulation through the unique chemistry and composition of their bodies, the alteration of human bodies (and absorption of some of the Oankali’s ugliness) is necessary to learn a new way of being. As horrifying as it may seem, the opportunity to become something different than human is one worthy of serious consideration.

However, this opportunity is not one that most of the humans in the novel are ready to consider. After being initiated into Oankali culture and invested with some of their powers, Lillith is given a room much like the one she first occupied, dossiers of the profiles of humans assembled through the Oankali’s experiments and interrogations, and the task of curating an intentional community. Despite her careful selection and the correspondence between Lillith’s predictions and their personalities, this community is
still dissonant and resistant. Though these newly reborn humans already have good cause to be suspicious of Lillith, race, gender, and sexuality further enable her legibility as a traitorous figure, a legibility that extends to Joseph, one of the awakened who becomes her lover. Nikanj (Jdaya’s non-gendered child who quickly matures into Lillith’s new mentor) warns her “Because there are already two human males speaking against him, trying to turn others against him. One has decided he’s something called a faggot and the other dislikes the shape of his eyes.”

In this post-apocalyptic setting, race and gender mark bodies whose adherence to the norms of masculinity and femininity were already suspect in the previous world. Black women have been read as exceeding the boundaries of normative femininity, as excessively dominant and powerful, (indeed, at one point some of the awakened humans begin to circulate a rumor that Lillith is a man, which seems to be as frightening to them as the prospect that she is an alien in disguise); Asian men have often been read as inadequately masculine, powerful, or virile. Even in this alternate world in which all human mechanisms for maintaining racialized power and privilege have been destroyed, some bodies, particularly those that counter and betray normative expectations of gender and sexuality, are rendered more alien than others. According to Harper, “The anger against Joseph manifests from homophobic, anti-miscegenation, anti-Chinese and speciesist sentiment rooted in hierarchical binary thinking.”

Even the Oankali are not immune to racialized thinking. Nikanj, the Oankali oooloi child who quickly evolves into a companion for Lillith and intermediary between her and the Oankali, “Ahjas and Dichaan are mystified,” it said. “They thought you would choose
one of the big dark ones because they’re like you. I said you would choose this one—
because he’s like you.” This quote reveals that there are black men among the
awakened that Lillith might have chosen from. That Lillith doesn’t choose one of them
might reflect Octavia Butler’s antipathy for black nationalism’s identity politics. But, I
argue that it also shows that solidarity is an intentional process, and there are ways
beyond, though not extricable from race to construct affinity and alliance. I do not say
this to advocate for a multicultural narrative but to propose that Lillith and Joseph’s
relationship suggests both a countering of normative understandings of masculinity and
femininity and a challenge to the black power moment’s framing of racial solidarity. It is
notable that Joseph is Chinese when we consider that the global anticolonial critique
represented by nationalist organizations’ affinity for China’s Maoist revolution was a
major element of Black Power that was suppressed by Cold War logics, further
domesticating the complexities of the Black Power Movement into the black power
moment.

We also might assume that the resistance to Lillith, even prior to the reveal of
Oankali plans for reproduction, is wrapped up in objection to a Black female as leader:
notably the Black men in the collective choose not to align with her. Reflecting the
sexualization of disruptive black femininity, in which Black women’s undermining of the
black communal body is tied to an excess of desire, the community repeatedly frames
their anger and accusations within calls of attention to her sexuality. When Lillith
emerges from her private room with Joseph to feed the awakened humans, one woman
asks if she is done ‘screwing.’ As at this point in the narrative everyone has selected
partners and spends a considerable amount of their time screwing, it is difficult to see why Lillith having sex should be a source of anger—unless we realize that race, gender, and her proximity to the Oankali already construct her sexuality as monstrous. The humans’ reaction to her relationship with Nikanj reflects the suspicion with which black female sexuality is always read, particularly if it is not properly directed, “Strip and screw your Nikanj right here for everyone to see, why don’t you? We know you’re their whore! Everybody here knows!” One male character, Gabriel says this to Lillith this even after he and his human female partner Tate have begun their intimate engagement with one of Nikanj’s parents, Kahguyaht.

Nikanj and Kahguyaht are both ooloi, non-gendered Oankali who facilitate mating and reproduction by transmitting sexual sensation as it gathers and stores genetic information in order to construct future children. Once mated through an ooloi, human beings cannot touch one another without repulsion. The sensory arms that ooloi use in sex are the same as those they use in practices of healing and genetic manipulation, practices that Lillith becomes accustomed to before she becomes sexually engaged with the Oankali, blurring the boundaries between these kinds of intimacy, and decreasing, or eliminating the role of any kind of courtship rituals in sexuality. Lillith’s sex with the Oankali reflects her resistance to patriarchy, sexualized violence, and dominant codes of masculinity. To explain this, I must address Lillith’s first contact with a human after awakening, Paul Titus. Awakened at fourteen years old, Paul Titus is a Black man who has spent half his life with the Oankali, but seems resentful and unadjusted to either their holistic lifestyle or differently gendered culture. He complains about the lack of real
hamburgers in the Oankali world and insists on calling Nikanj male. After a conversation in which Paul rejects Lillith’s more open and accommodating attitude towards Oankali culture, he tries to rape her. As Harper claims, this act is an attempt to reinforce his Western human sense of manhood withheld by the denial of meat or human females in his life with the Oankali. While the question of consent is also muddied in at least Lillith’s first intimate contacts with the Oankali, she does not read these interactions within the framework of the sexualized violence she suffered from Paul Titus.

Sex with the monster is different from phallic sex in the terms for female participation. Relevant to the discussion of Lillith’s sex with the Oankali is Patricia MacCormack’s treatment of Andrzej Zulawski’s Possession, a film in which a woman stifled by the normative terms of heterosexuality gives birth to a mass of mucous that she has sex with as it changes shape from a mass to a tentacled monster to a copy of her husband. MacCormack contends that the monster that Anna creates is an expression of slimy, ever present and amorphous female desire that allows her to escape the script of heteronormative, phallocentric sex and social order. Similarly, Lillith’s sex with the monster disturbs normative societal relations and human conceptions of sexuality. The mediation of the ooloi disallow women’s pleasure from being subordinated, and it takes pleasure out of the realm of courtship rituals that often reinscribe heteropatriarchal relations.

Like Paul, Joseph initially reads Nikanj as male and resists his interference in he and Lillith’s relationship. This brief assertion of masculine ego bothers Lillith because
she recognizes that his resistance to this pleasurable, but queering experience is wrapped up in patriarchy, which naturalizes of sexual violence. “The refusal to accept Nikanj’s sex frightened her because it reminded her of Paul Titus. She did not want to see Paul Titus in Joseph.” Remembering her assault by Titus, Lillith welcomes alien sex perhaps for the same reasons that Ana in Possession desires her monster, “Chance is accepting unbound possibility, questioning but not predicting an answer. Anna is forced to choose between faith in heterosexuality or the chance of something else through unbinding desire. Faith is phallic sexuality; chance is monster sex, sex in transit, nomadic sex.” Here, we see Lillith’s and Joseph’s willingness to exchange their heterosexuality for the more startling, but intense experience of monster sex:

Lillith saw Joseph’s body stiffen, then relax, and she knew Nikanj had read him correctly. He neither struggled nor argued as Nikanj positioned him more comfortably against its body. Lillith saw that he had his eyes closed again, his face peaceful. Now he was ready to accept what he had wanted from the beginning.

Silently, Lillith got up, stripped off her jacket, and went to the bed. She stood over it, looking down. For a moment, she saw Nikanj as she had once scene Jdaya—as a totally alien being, grotesque, repellant beyond mere ugliness with its night crawler body tentacles, its snake head tentacles, and its tendency to keep both moving, signaling attention and emotion…She jumped when Nikanj touched her with the tip of a sensory arm. She stared at it for a moment longer wondering just how she had lost her horror at such a being. Then she lay down, perversely eager for what it could give her. She positioned herself against it, and was not content until she felt the deceptively light touch of the sensory hand and felt the oooloi body tremble against her.

Nikanj resolves the issue of force and coercion by insisting that Joseph’s body has already chosen, and that it is the body’s choice that matters. In the world of Dawn and the Oankali, the body determines and overrides the intellectual defenses that make certain
considerations, and therefore radical possibilities for experience and connection, impossible. Nikanj’s transmission of Lillith and Joseph’s union heightens and multiplies their emotional and sensual connection. The scene brings to mind how human sexuality is always already mediated: by race, discourse, fantasy, and material systems of power. The grotesque image of this Oankali-facilitated threesome replaces those often unstated and less conscious mediation with the obvious and physical presence of alien body. While taking pleasure in the process himself, Nikanj’s intervention boils Lillith and Joseph down to the purest essence of themselves, to connect with one another from a place of affinity and equality.

This scene with Joseph is part of a longer sequence in which the ooloi, without warning, drug the humans and come into their living space to mate with the mostly heterosexual pairs that have formed. The men attempt to fight and have to be chemically subdued. The women, while also drugged, seem to be more open to the possibilities that the ooloi have to offer. Though resistance and violence had been brewing in the community for some time before this scene, it is only after this experience that several male characters plot to escape and wage war on the Oankali. Their terror is not just at the loss of themselves and future generations as recognizable human beings, it is at their own pleasurable response to the forcible queering necessitated by the Oankali trade, “His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away.” Here, the grotesque scene of what is essentially a human-alien orgy is used to heighten the threat to the masculine body.
What if we see Lilith’s biggest betrayal, her enabling of the profanity of manhood, as a threshold rather than defeat? Dareik Scott explores such a possibility in *Extravagant Abjection*, proposing that the abject, the space of humiliation or defeat, is an inescapable aspect of blackness that can actually be read as a site of power—a power which learns from and draws on the experience of being subjected rather than seeking to escape it. In a study that focuses on profaned manhood, Scott argues that sexual humiliation, particularly for men, erodes the kind of understandings and protections of “self” that actually inhibit transformative ideas about personhood, community, and social life. According to Scott:

I argue that the abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power—indeed, what we can begin to think of as black power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary.279

Here, Scott refigures the masculine stance of Black Power as a different kind of black power, the power that can come from being forced to recognize (because of being excluded from) the constructed and problematic nature of the rights and responsibilities of manhood—protecting, providing, dominating. In Scott’s analysis of literary texts depicting male sexual humiliation, men denied the bodily integrity foundational to Western manhood learn and practice other ways of being and relating. And in Dawn, it is only through erosion of ego protections, largely represented by a post-apocalyptic clinging to masculine norms, that this newborn community of humans will be able to access the symbiotic, organic interdependence of Oankali life. In this, I am brought back
to a discussion of the black communal body. In the black political imagination, disruptive black femininity suggests other forms of the alleged deviance that threaten the face of the black communal body: illegitimate children, nonheteronormativity, and excessive sexuality. In her scrutiny of the discourse of matriarchy\textsuperscript{280} Hortense Spiller finds that the concept of ‘the family’ that matriarchy discourse measures Black families against is not a natural arrangement, but a patriarchal order existing for the purpose of property relations, the ‘Law of the Father.’\textsuperscript{281} What needs critical attention, then, is not Black folks’ refusal to ape the Law of the Father but the Law itself. How we might respond to the supposed rabid occurrence of single motherhood is not a surge of marriage promotion and male mentoring programs, but an arrangement of communities, resources, and protections so that the flexible and female-centered family might thrive. Different objectives, new forms of hope, and un-thought of ways of relating become possible if we center those things and people that constitute the monstrous in the black political [masculinist, middle class black political] imagination. Cathy Cohen explores such a possibility in her important piece, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics.” I reproduce the full title here because of the rhetorical effect of listing these figures: punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens—the unruly folks who are not imagined as desirable members of the community in the vision of either a bourgeoisie respectability or militant nationalism. Cohen offers a framework for a different kind of progressive coalitional politics, in which groups ally not because of the assumption of unitary identity and experience, but because of shared relationships to dominant power, and pursue recognition in ways that seek to destabilize that power rather than assimilate into the ideal
forms that it sanctions. Hortense Spillers hints at similar possibilities for the monstrous,

We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject. Actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment.

Here, Spillers argues not for Black women’s inclusion within normative terms of gender, but for a different script for its performance. I read disruptive black femininity through Spillers to argue that rather than counter, we might embrace the claim that the Black woman “brings down the Black man.” If this Black “man” is actually the black version of Wynter’s “Man,” the masculinized, unqueered black communal body itself, then it needs to be brought down—a different, more open, vibrant, vulnerable, messy conceptualization of black collectivity put in its place.

It would be neglectful to ignore the role of coercion in the Oankali mission. Though Jdaya portrays the trade as mutually affecting and beneficial, it is certainly not voluntary on both sides. He says in response to Lillith’s protests, “We are committed to the trade.” Human commitment does not matter. And as we meet Oankali who are product of centuries of hybridity but no other peoples who have maintained some sense of their own identity and history, it does seem as if the trade process is more one of acquisition and assimilation, resulting in the complete absorption of the species which the Oankali target for their own improvement. A vindicationist reading of Lillith’s role in the Oankali mission would be to read her response to this violence as one of covert resistance and protracted struggle. Perhaps pragmatically, she sees the reaches of Oankali power
and eschews immediate violent resistance in favor of a politics of survival. She seems to place her faith in observation and eventual escape. After learning that she is pregnant with the first human-Oankali construct child, Lilith assents to the fate she had feared, the mothering of mutant Medusa children, as the condition of the opportunity to prepare more communities of humans for a more effective resistance, “She would have more information for them this time…A few fertile people might slip through and find one another. Learn and run! If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be.”

Lillith appears to have ulterior motives for cooperating with the Oankali, in that she hopes that resettlement on earth will present an opportunity for humans to get away and preserve their humanity. This would seem to coincide with Osherow’s reading, which states, “Lilith, while appearing to cooperate with her captors in the eyes of fellow humans, does what she can to undermine the Oankali and preserve her own people, just as her African American ancestors participated in the sabotage and destruction of their oppressors.”

However, I want to venture into a more blasphemous and troubling territory than a reading of Lillith as only being ultimately interested in the preservation of humanity suggests. I wish to depart from a metaphorical reading of science fiction that creates one-to-one analogies to literal real world situations or a tradition in black feminist criticism where we engage archetypes of Black women in order to refute them. What if the beauty of undisturbed humanity, the integrity of the community’s body, the ‘best’ representation of black femininity is not what we desire? Butler, while depicting Lillith’s horror of the grotesque also makes another reading available—that Lillith is intrigued by it and what
the Oankali have to offer. Before the war, Lillith had decided to study anthropology because of her concerns about the destructive patterns of human culture. This conversation with the first person she awakens, Tate, elaborates upon those concerns:

“Anthropology,” Tate said disparagingly. “Why did you want to snoop through other people’s cultures? Couldn’t you find what you wanted in your own?”

Lillith smiled and noticed that Tate frowned as though this was the beginning of a wrong answer. “I started out wanting to do exactly that,” Lillith said. “Snoop. Seek. It seemed to me that my culture—ours—was running headlong over a cliff. And, of course, as it turned out, it was. I thought there must be saner ways of life.”

Though Lillith doesn’t explicitly say it, Oankali culture, aside from its tendencies towards force and acquisition is, in its patterns of sustainability, articulation, communication, and interdependence, one of the possible ‘saner ways of life’ that she was seeking before the war. According to Plisner, “The idea that her field of work was so heavily grounded in the cultural/social experiences of studied populations, coupled with her structuralist social conceptions, legitimates Lilith’s inclination towards the Oankali and the Oankali’s recognition of her ability to successfully navigate who they are and what they represent.” As a Black woman whose claim to the category of human was never secure, and a scholar who had hoped that different cultures might contain ways of living and knowing which could contest the madness of nuclear arms buildup, Lillith may be open to a trade. Many of the steps that move forward Lillith’s interactions with the Oankali are of her initiative: she asks to see Jdaya fully, asks about the intricacies of their culture, asks Nikanj to use his sensory skills upon her. We could read this as a proactive acquiescence, or curiosity, but I choose to read it as a certain openness to
posthuman possibility that Lillith cannot admit aloud to herself. According to Naomi Jacobs, “Butler’s critical dystopia suggests a resource for hope in these very violations and ruptures—indeed, in the evolution of the human towards a posthuman body, posthuman subjectivity, and posthuman form of agency.”

Critical posthumanist theory points out that in modern thought, the concept of the human has actually been constructed around white, male, heterosexual, bourgeois life and subjectivity. “The post of posthumanism should be a ‘post’ to the heritage of humanism, which makes humans the only subjects in a world of objects.” Theorizing in the process of colonial projects and empire building, Western Europeans were only able to construct the human in opposition to people they encountered in other lands, who needed to be rendered as non-human or less than human in order to be enslaved or eliminated in service to the project of empire. Black people’s intellectual and activist labor towards inclusion within or redefinition of concepts such as humanity, beauty, citizenship, and the nation have been vital and productive. But perhaps it is the troubling and dismantling of these concepts themselves that points the way to a more radical vision for black futures. The grotesque is one way to depart from the struggle for inclusion, which in turn invalidates the kinds of ‘protective’ and ‘shielding’ strategies (as discussed in my treatment of Escape from Beckyville) that aim to discipline the black communal body, to present the community’s ‘best face’. The Black Power Movement began the work of centering the politics of respectability and raising the visibility and concerns of the poor in contrast to the costly compromises of black liberalism, but it also, (partly due to its own gendered and sexual rhetoric and partly because of the pressures of cold war
logics) managed to reify normative (if less sanitized) concepts of gender and centralize a practice of representative essentialism in black political culture. I choose to read *Dawn* not as a strict analogy for the black condition but as a signifying text which offers a way to an otherwise, demanding political possibilities beyond liberalism or nationalism, violent resistance or assimilation.

Butler’s *Dawn* certainly has its problematics—a reliance on biological essentialism, an underlying heteronormativity even in the Oankali’s complex sexual and family relations, and the disturbing insistence of the text that complete capitulation of one people to another is the only viable option, at least for the moment. But even with these problems the novel asks us to consider a fruitful possibility—that integrity of the body (human, male, or communal) might need to be sacrificed in order to access what the ‘monsters’ have to offer. My analysis of *Dawn* benefits from its focus on restoring the novel to a mainstream science fiction canon while also looking at it as an expression of black political thought. Attention to black politics allows us to see expanded possibilities for the representation of the ugly alien in science fiction, which elevates and complicates it beyond a soulless predator or a simple metaphor for racial other. Through startling invasions of bodily integrity *Dawn* calls for ways of thinking an otherwise world that have not yet been spoken. It ultimately nods toward what should be a great meeting place of science fiction and black political discourse, a politics that is willing to contemplate the grotesque, the monstrous, the unthinkable in the interest of creating a more just world.
CONCLUSION

Writing in a genre that is often embraced as an opportunity to escape racial oppression, the authors that I examine reveal the gendered assumptions embedded in the desire for escape, and the impossibility of constructing a better future for all Black people without confronting those assumptions. As my four chapters demonstrate, Black women’s science fiction frequently, (though not exclusively) calls into the question popular black political discourses that call on disciplined womanhood and heteronormative family as preconditions for community progress. In what might be the first known novel of Black women’s science fiction, Pauline Hopkins participates in the construction of but also critiques an association of the degradation of slavery with black femininity and aspiration to the ‘traditional’ gender norms of a mythical African past. Critical readings of the novel tend to reproduce a narrative of the patriarchal return to the African past as purifying from slavery’s sexual violence, rather than focus upon Hopkins’ more complex mediations upon the violence of protection in its refusal of Black women’s autonomy and the need to face slavery as a site of constructing the inextricable pain and beauty of blackness. Also addressing issues of violence, protection, and the role of past trauma in black collective identity, Tananarive Due intersects black urban romance, gothic horror, and science fiction to dramatize the struggle between black feminine autonomy and the desire to ‘achieve’ the elusive black nuclear family. Nicole Sconiers’ *Escape from Beckyville* illustrates the nightmarish outcomes of Black women’s internalization of disciplinary discourses of black womanhood and black politics’ capacity to align itself with neoliberal logics. And Octavia Butler, the one author I
include in this study who is readily claimed and heralded within Afrofuturism Studies, demonstrates a recurring concern with the resonance of Black Power era postures regarding subjection, resistance, and the feminized racial past. In each case, to differing degrees, these texts leave readers with a profound sense of uneasiness about the future, the past, and most, of all, the present. My study sits at the intersection of black studies, black feminism, and SF studies, and proposes the usefulness of uneasiness to enhancing Afrofuturism’s critical capacity.
Notes to Introduction

1. I was trained in a Black/Africana Studies tradition in which the capitalization of B in Black when referring to Black people signals respect for an identity that is historical, cultural, and chosen, not only racial and imposed. To maintain my connection to this tradition while avoiding excessive capitalization in my work, I use the lowercase form when referring to concepts, theories, cultural production, and analytical figures and the uppercase when referring specifically to people.

2. Robin D.G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: The Free Press, 1994). In Race Rebels, Robin D.G. Kelley argues for an expanded notion of politics, to include not just formal electoral politics, labor unionization, and organizations but also the daily acts of resistance and the cultural production, and the not commonly recognized affiliations of black working class people. Calling this expanded concept of politics infrapolitics, he looks at sites and practices such as “toting,” strategic quitting, and resisting uniforms by domestic workers, gangsta rap, Malcom X’s early life, and involvement in the Communist Party. Richard Iton, In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Arguing that cultural actors have always been a part of black political movements and thought and that during and after the Civil Rights Movement a certain Rustinian (Bayard Rustin) concept that black politics were best carried out in the legitimate sphere of electoral politics and sanctioned institutions (away from cultural and protest politics) gained dominance, Richard Iton argues for a broader consideration of black politics and attention to how they take shape in the hypervisible sphere of black popular culture. Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Insisting that electoral politics, community organizing, and participating in organizations are not the only or most important sites of political thought, Melissa Harris-Perry looks at everyday talk in prominent social spaces as important areas in which, through discourse, African American political lives and attitudes are shaped.


Through my studies of black nationalism I have defined five recurring forms, which are fluid, contested, often overlapping or colliding, but recognizable. (1) We-ness: the sense, outlook, that binds black people to one another in our perception of ourselves in the world, entirely compatible and integrally embedded in all forms of black political philosophy and practice, a belief, even loose, in common interests and threats, with a wide range of rigidity to flexibility—can be exclusive and violent as well as diffuse, expansive, and fluid; can prioritize racial solidarity at all costs or find alliance with class-based and multiracial movements (ex: Black Lives Matter). This we-ness is a prerequisite to all other forms of nationalism and the essence of black politics. (2) Classic nationalism: a formation, traceable to the nineteenth century, which seeks the establishment of a separate state for black people, often through return to Africa, forerunner but not synonymous to Pan Africanism (which seeks to establish Africa as a powerful homeland through which descendants throughout the world can elevate their position in their respective states), articulated by thinkers such as Martin Delany and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, historically intertwined with Ethiopianist philosophy and uneasily aligned with colonial projects, more recently expressed in terms of aspiration to a separatist state or self-contained black urban communities. (3) Cultural nationalism: a practice and ‘style’ that frames liberation in terms of mental and spiritual liberation from white supremacist culture, promotes a ‘return’ to African names, dress, cultural practices,
etc. while often emphasizing ancient African civilizations as proper root of contemporary black identity and viewing enslavement as a period of disorganization, distortion, and pollution, of properly African people. (4) Black Power nationalism: a form of political black nationalism most visible during and after the Civil Rights Movement and the beginning of the decline of the liberal consensus...practiced variably by a myriad of organizations and institutions taking a rhetorically pro-black stance. Its most radical forms emphasized the limitations of liberal reform, solidarity with third world and anticolonial movements, and resistance to capitalism...however its most visible proponents often propagated an aggressive preoccupation with black manhood and its brief cohesion with liberal black politics rechanneled resistant energies into electoral politics, black capitalism, and ‘representative’ logics that marginalized less powerful members of the ‘community’. (5) Neo-nationalism: a contemporary, highly exclusive and violent distortion of Black Power nationalism with borrows highly from its gender and sexual politics, confrontational rhetoric and iconographic imagery but not from its structural critique or anti-imperialism—frames neoliberal logics and heteronormativity as the radical way to resist white supremacy and the compromises of liberal, reform-oriented black politics.


19 I am thinking of recent black feminist and black queer studies works including but not limited to Lamonda Horton Stallings Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture and
Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures; Dareik Scott’s Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination; Jennifer C. Nash’s The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography; Mireille Miller Young’s A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography, and Uri McMillan’s Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance. Most of these works question the association of black women’s participation in visual and sexual cultures primarily with injury and provide productive readings of sites and performances that traditional reading strategies of both black feminism and black studies more broadly would find irredeemable within a logic of resistance.


23 Ibid 19.

24 In the opening of this project I use Afrofuturism and black science fiction interchangeably. But I distinguish between Afrofuturism in terms of cultural production and Afrofuturism Studies. To clarify this distinction and to reflect my focus on, primarily, literary texts (only a subset as Afrofuturism includes technoculture, music, digital culture, etc.) I thereafter use black science fiction.

Notes to Chapter One

25 Claudia Tate, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of Century, 5 (Oxford UP, 1993).


28 Ibid., 14.


31 White, Location 1132.

32 Moses, 43.


35 Ibid., 173.

36 Ibid., 208.


38 Ibid., 465.

39 Schrager, 194.

40 Hopkins, 492.

41 Ibid., 479.

42 Ibid., 454.

43 Hopkins, 491-92.

44 Hopkins, 496.

45 Hopkins, 501.
Hopkins, 499.

Hopkins, 579.

Hopkins, 502.

Hopkins, 609-10.


Christina Sharpe opens her discussion of miscegenation and incest with a brief analysis of a polemic by pro-slavery statesman Henry Hughes, who wrote that “The law of nature is the law of God. The same law that forbids consanguineous amalgamation forbids ethnical amalgamation. Both are incestuous. Amalgamation is incest.” Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology: Theoretical and Practical* 1854: District Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 240.

Sharpe, 28.

Shawn Salvant, “Pauline Hopkins and the End of Incest.” *African American Review* 42.3-4: 663.


Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black heroine’s Text at the Turn of Century* (Oxford UP, 1993), 196.


Claudia Tate’s landmark *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* reframes and retrieves black women’s turn-of-the-century sentimental fiction—often dismissed by critics as trivial and disengaged from political and material realities—as sites of political discourse. In the context of the post-Reconstruction era’s rollbacks of civil rights and brutal racial violence domestic fiction (stories of bourgeois courtship and family formation in which a heroine undergoes a number of trials before securing a happy marriage) reflected larger black political projects that invested in uplift, behavioral reform, and the family as alternative paths to full inclusion and prosperity in the United States. (1993: Oxford) I suggest that the more contemporary urban romance of the post-Terry McMillan “black books boom” that Tananarive Due identifies her work as benefiting from and overlapping has some similar features and interventions.


Ibid., 59.

Ibid., 64.

Ibid., 35.

Ibid., 48.

Ibid., 24

Ibid., 171.

Ibid., 46-49.

Ibid., 38.

Ibid., 23.

Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 117.

Ibid., 221.


Martin Delany’s *Blake, or the Huts of America* (Edited by Floyd J. Miller, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, First Published 1861-1862) imagines a large-scale and transnational slave revolution; Sutton E. Griggs *Imperium In Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Novel* (North Stratford: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc 2000, First Published 1899) imagines an underground nation plotting revolution; W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess: A Romance* (New Introduction by Herbert Aptheker. New York: Kraus-Thompson Organization Limited 1974, Originally Published 1928 New York: Harcourt) imagines an international political organization of people of color based in the imagined Indian nation of Bwodpur; Pauline Hopkins *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* imagines the ancient African city of Tellessar; Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook that Sat by the Door* (London: Allison & Busby 1969) imagines the underground organization of young gangs into a massive urban insurrection; Tananarive Due’s African Immortals Series imagines the hidden world of the Life Brothers, who have lived among humans for thousands of years. The settings of all of these novels are fairly contemporary to their publication, not futuristic.
Notes to Chapter Two


108 Spillers, 69.


110 Ibid., 84.

111 Ibid., 87.

112 Spillers, 65.

113 Ibid., 80.

114 *Think Like a Man* Tim Story. Written by Keith Merryman and David Newman. Gabrielle Union, Kevin Hart. USA 2012. [find the episode where Judge Joe Brown went off on that single mother, saying she was the reason for all the crime on the streets]


Ibid., 647.


Keeling, Location 928.

Ibid.


Keeling, Location 816.


Keeling, Location 893.


Ibid., 887.


Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 9.

Ibid., 17.

Ibid., 111.
134  Ibid., 133-142.
135  Ibid., 87.
137  Ibid., 496.
140  Kindred, 12.
142  Kenan 497.
143  Nira Yuval-Davis, Gender and Nation (London: Sage Publications 1997)
144  Ibid., 97.
145  Ibid., 97.
147  Ibid., 109.
148  Ibid., 101.
149  Ibid., 184.
150  Kindred, 190
151  Ibid., 194.
152  Butler, 149.
Linda Brent (Harriet Ann Jacobs), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, find pub info and page

Ibid., 250.

Ibid., 96.

Butler 236.

Ibid., 233. For discussion of utopian potential, see Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 7. Reading through Munoz’s analysis, I also see this moment between Alice and Rufus as similar in energy and potential as the bloody embrace in the bathroom at the end of Amiri Baraka’s play *The Toilet*. It suggests not redemption for the ‘lover’ who has been violent towards the other or compensation for the violence done, but a gesture of relationality that interrupts the politics of the present moment, the demands of straight time, in which these two characters can only touch through violence, 83.

Notes to Chapter Three

170 Nicole Sconiers, phone interview, March 8, 2012.

171 Nalo Hopkinson, class discussion, March 2012.


174 Ibid., 191.

175 Ibid., 187.


177 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Boston: UnwinHyman 1990), 133-160.


180 Erica Edwards, Edwards, Erica, Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 249.


Ibid., Location 62.

Ibid., Location 180.


Ibid., 1.

Ibid., 8.


Sconiers 13.

Ibid., 5-6.

Sconiers 12.

Hazel Carby and E. Frances White have discussed the ways in which Black feminist criticism, which has had a certain stake in identifying and disproving stereotypes of Black women, has itself invested in the politics of respectability, a politics central to much of the ideology and practice of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century Black female intellectuals and activists to whom contemporary scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins have traced the roots of Black feminism. Work by Evelyn Hammonds, Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Victoria Wolcott, Candice M. Jenkins, Lisa Thompson, Lamonda Horton Stallings and more Black feminist critics have deconstructed the logic of this politics and offered more complicated, more class-conscious, less “respectable” readings of Black women’s intellectual and cultural production. This essay is informed by much of that latter work.


196 Harris-Perry, Location 1464, 1540.

197 Sconiers, 17.

198 Jenkins, Candice M. *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 16.

199 Sconiers, 2.


203 In defining the culture of discipline, I am identifying a movement in black popular culture, with of course older antecedents but congealing most visibly with the work of Bishop T.D. Jakes in his *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* speaking tours in 2010 and continuing through the cultural work of Tyler Perry, Steve Harvey, and even younger authors such as Tyrese, that centers around patriarchal voices speaking to black women about what they need to do to fix their lives and create heteronormative partnerships. The presumption is that the black male voice is more appropriate for such instruction than the counsel of female confidantes, and the presumed audience is lonely black women. The discourses these voices propagate usually advocate conservative sexual norms and some form of submission to patriarchal culture.

204 Sconiers, 127

Ibid., Location 300.

Ibid., Location 336.

Ibid., Location 530.

Clarke Location 2490-2499.

Ibid., Location 3203.


Sconiers, 132.


Ibid., 170.

Sconiers, 129.

Ibid., 129.

Ibid., 140-141.

Thompson, 14.

Sconiers, 138.

Sconiers, 145.

Ibid., 146.

Ibid., 3.

Sconiers, 44.

Ibid., 44.

Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 74-77.


Edwards, Location 447.

Notes to Chapter Four


Kenan, 502-504.


237 Mercer, 144.


241 Hobson, 98.


244 Ibid., 4.

245 *The Time has Come 1964-66*, Directed by James A. DeVInney & Madison Davis Lacy Jr., in *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985* Created and executive produced by Henry Hampton (1990; Blackside Inc). For example, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee engaged in voter registration drives before and after its turn to Black Power as an ideology. But where previous voter registration drives may have been framed in terms of the need for inclusion, Black nationalist emphasis on voter participation was premised on the idea that those in demographic majorities in areas (largely black people in Lowndes County Mississippi where the SNCC adopted the black panther as a political symbol) should control the politics of those areas.


247 Ibid.
248 Austin, 52.


250 Ibid., 133-142. Alexander-Floyd, while perhaps not contextualizing these distinct histories thoroughly, compares the black woman-as-traitor trope to the Chicano figure of La Malinche. According to Alexander-Floyd, The Black Malinche, according to Alexander-Floyd, often appears in highly publicized spectacles of black male embarrassment, in which black press and commentators focus on black women as the temptresses who undermine the careers of powerful black men.


252 Ibid., 79.


255 Ibid., 11-12.
256 Ibid., 37.


258 Butler, 28-29.

260 Ibid., 118-125.

261 Ibid., 159.

262 Ibid., 147.


264 Harper, 123.

265 Ibid., 164.


267 Harper, 123.

268 Butler, 165.

269 Ibid., 240.

270 Ibid., 87.

271 Harper, 120.


273 Butler, 170.

274 Ibid, 170.

275 McCormick, 234.

276 Butler, 190-191.

277 Ibid., 203.

278 Ibid., 193.

Spillers, 74-75.

Spillers, 80.


Spillers, 79.

Butler, 41.

Butler, 248.

Osherow, 79.

Butler, 132.


Butler, 11, 33, 78.


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