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Articles

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Kalí Tal's scholarship spans a wide range of subjects, from African American literary and critical theory, to trauma studies, to post–World War II U.S. cultural studies, to cyberculture. In addition to her scholarly work, she is an antiracist activist dedicated to merging theory and practice. Currently she is working on a two-volume study comparing African American futurist visions to the representation of Africans and African Americans in futurist works by white fiction writers and critics. Kalí Tal is a professor of humanities at the University of Arizona.

Fatimah Tuggar is a New York–based multidisciplinary artist who combines images and sounds from African and Western life to comment on how technology diversely impacts global and local realities. Her work has been widely exhibited at national and international venues, including the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, P.S. 1 Institute for Contemporary Art, and the Johannesburg Biennale.

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Introduction

FUTURE TEXTS

We will make our own future Text.
—Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

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and on to post now
post new
—Amiri Baraka, "Time Factor a Perfect Non-Gap"

In popular mythology, the early years of the late-1990s digital boom were characterized by the rags-to-riches stories of dot-com millionaires and the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress. As more pragmatic assessments of the industry surfaced, so too did talk of the myriad inequities that were exacerbated by the information economy—most notably, the digital divide, a phrase that has been used to describe gaps in technological access that fall along lines of race, gender, region, and ability but has mostly become a code word for the tech inequities that exist between blacks and whites. Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere. What matters is less a choice between these two narratives, which fall into conventional libertarian and conservative frameworks, and more what they have in common: namely, the assumption that race is a liability in the twenty-first century—is either negligible or evidence of negligence. In these politics of the future, supposedly novel paradigms for understanding technology smack of old racial ideologies. In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life. Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress.

That race (and gender) distinctions would be eliminated with technology was perhaps the founding fiction of the digital age. The raceless future paradigm, an adjunct of Marshall McLuhan's "global village" metaphor, was widely supported by (and made strange bedfellows of) pop visionaries, scholars, and corporations from Timothy Leary to Allucquère Rosanne Stone to MCI. Spurred by "revolutions" in technoscience, social and cultural theorists looked increasingly to information technology, especially the Internet and the World Wide Web, for new paradigms. We

might call this cadre of analysts and boosters of technoculture, who stressed the unequivocal novelty of identity in the digital age, neocritics. Seemingly working in tandem with corporate advertisers, neocritics argued that the information age ushered in a new era of subjectivity and insisted that in the future the body wouldn't bother us any longer. There was a peculiar capitalist logic to these claims, as if writers had taken up the marketing argot of "new and improved."

There was also much that was familiar in this rhetoric. As rapturous proclamations of the Internet's ability to connect everyone, everywhere echoed the predictions that greeted the age of the telephone, so did neocriticism's imperative to embrace the new and transform the body fall neatly in line with older narratives of technology and forgetting—most notably, the futurism movement of the turn of the twentieth century. In 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian artist, published "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in which he called for a new aesthetic that could properly represent the sensation of living in a rapidly modernizing world. Marinetti glorified the creative destruction of war, exalted the beauty of "eternal, omnipresent speed," and promised to sing of the revolutionary potential of factories, shipyards, locomotives, and airplanes. He called for the end of the old, proclaiming, "But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong *Futurists*!"[1] In constructing his vision of the future, Marinetti implicitly evoked a subjectivity that was decidedly male, young, and carved out in relation to the past and the "feminine."

While neocriticism's take on identity tended more toward the glorification of the self's dissolving than its hardening, it was propelled by a similar impetus to understand the technological transformations that characterized the beginning of a new era. Technoevangelist Timothy Leary proclaimed that advances in technology augured the end of burdensome social identities. Out with those old categories from the social movements of the 1960s, in with the new. Leary predicted that "in the future, the methods of information technology, molecular engineering, biotechnology, nanotechnology (atom stacking), and quantum-digital programming could make the human form a matter totally determined by individual whim, style, and seasonal choice."[2] Leary's prediction was social science fiction, a rendering of the not-now, a possible future without a certain end but loaded with assumptions. He assumed that "ever-loosening physical constraints" would free us from our cumbersome bodies and imagined that in the future identity would be driven by the consumer imperatives of whim and choice. Technology offered a future of wholly new human beings—unfettered not only from the physical body but from past human experience as well. Leary presupposed that such freedom would be widely

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available and universally sought after. Yet as Andrew Ross cautioned, "radical humanism" of the sort Leary advocated would, by choice or circumstance, "only free a minority of humans."[3] Bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to the freely constructed identity that Leary advocated. To be sure, his theory is an extreme example of the neocriticism that characterizes much writing about the social impact of computer technology. And yet the spirit of Leary's discourse of disembodiment, which fit an unrelentingly progressive and libertarian vision of the future, became an important inspiration for theories of identity in the digital age.

For others, technological change was the catalyst for a transformation of conceptions of the self.[4] In the influential work *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Allucquère Rosanne Stone marshaled theory, observation, and fictionalized anecdote to describe the nature of contemporary identity. According to Stone, in the "virtual age" our awareness of the fragmented self is heightened by computer-mediated communication.[5] In crafting her argument, Stone was influenced by two theories of identity and multiplicity. One held that the decentered self is the reaction of the body/subject/citizen to absolute state power; by this logic, fragmented identity is an assertion of agency under a system of complete subjugation. Stone's argument was also informed by psychological literature on multiple personality disorders (MPDs), in which "split personalities" are explained as responses to violence, trauma, and other "less overt methods of subjection." In this model, manifold selves are understood as a tactic for negotiating forms of oppression.

Despite the grave implications of these hypotheses, Stone aspired to recoup such multiplicity as a practice of pleasure and desire. But in her rush to celebrate the possibilities opened up by computer technology, Stone overlooked the fact that, as Kalí Tal has suggested, over a century's worth of "sophisticated tools for the analysis of cyberculture" already existed in African American thought.[6] These extant theories, Tal insists, provide political and theoretical precedents for articulating and understanding "multiple identities, fragmented personae and liminality"—most notably W. E. B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness. They also "contradict the notion that the absence of the (illusion of) unitary self is something new": despite the easy proliferation of selves in the digital age, the flux of identity that Stone extolled has long been the experience of African diasporic people.

DuBois's double consciousness was not simply an uncritical assertion of multiple personalities but rather a dogged analysis of both the origins and stakes of this multiplicity. What falls by the wayside in Stone's analysis—and neocriticism more generally—is an appraisal of identity that

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does not simply look to what is seemingly new about the self in the "virtual age" but looks backward *and* forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was *and* what if. While Stone gives poignant witness to the ontology of multiplicity, she is less able to show how the dialectic between defining oneself in light of ties to one's history and experience and being defined from without (be it in virtual or physical space, by stereotypes or the state) determines the shape of computer-mediated aggregate identities as much or more than the leisurely flux of personality.

Like Leary's predictions, Stone's argument begged the question of who would be able to so easily cast aside identity and, moreover, what was at stake in doing so. While Stone is careful to maintain that there is indeed a link between virtual and physical selves, she nevertheless deploys an identity politics that privileges personality performance. Yet understanding the changing terrain of identity in the virtual age requires not only attention to the technical construction of selves over a distributed network but a sense of how multiplicity works to both deflect and buttress structures of power and an understanding of how selves are differently situated both within and outside of this network.

In contrast, the shifting ecology of racialization in the virtual age has been most thoroughly explored in the scholarship of Lisa Nakamura. Nakamura's analyses of sci-fi films, technology advertisements, and identity tourism in MUDs and MOOs have offered counterpoints to the often hidden racial ideologies of the information era.[7] In a study of late-1990s ads for computer companies, Nakamura explored how the promise of a liberated world of tomorrow, free of the cumbersome weight of racial identity, is proliferated by corporations in television commercials and print advertising—most memorably in a 1997 commercial for MCI entitled "Anthem," which pronounced that there was no age, gender, or race on the Internet. Nakamura examined how several corporations deployed images of people of color, often in "exotic" locales, to sell their wares; yet these representations were merely colorful backdrops to commercial disavowals of racial difference. As Nakamura explained: "The iconography of these advertising images demonstrates that the corporate image factory *needs* images of the Other in order to depict its product: a technological utopia of difference. It is not however, a utopia *for* the Other or one that includes it in any meaningful or progressive way. Rather, it proposes an ideal world of virtual social and cultural reality based on specific methods of 'Othering.'"[8]

One such method of "othering" was the ads' use of imagery of exotic people and places, emancipated from past histories and contemporary sociopolitical context. As Nakamura observed, "ethnic difference in the

world of Internet advertising is visually 'cleansed' of its divisive, problematic, tragic connotations. The ads function as corrective texts for readers deluged with images of racial conflicts and bloodshed both at home and abroad. These advertisements put the world right." The experiences of the people depicted were rendered negligible or, in Nakamura's words, "made 'not to count,' through technology."[9]

Public discourse about race and technology, led by advertisers (and aided and abetted by cybertheorists), was preoccupied with the imagined new social arrangements that might be made possible by technological advance. Advertisers relied on a shared message about race and ethnicity — the disappearance of the DuBoisian "color line" — to promote their products. Nakamura's study elucidated how centrally race figures in contemporary narratives of technology, even in its (putative) absence. Representations of race and ethnicity created a cognitive dissonance in tech advertising; dissimilitude was slyly neutralized but never fully erased, for this alterity was necessary to the ideology of the technology being sold.

If the ads scrutinized by Nakamura can be said to reflect the high-tech, raceless promised land (and its internal inconsistencies), a recent South African ad for Land Rover illuminates the stakes of the other predominant discourse of race and technology, the digital divide. The ad, which ran in popular magazines in South Africa, depicts a Himba woman from Namibia in traditional attire. Much like an image from *National Geographic* (Nakamura makes a similar observation regarding the advertisements she discussed), the woman is shown bare-breasted. She stands alone in the desert, her only companion the latest model of the Land Rover Freelander, speedily departing. The force of the vehicle's back draft as it accelerates pulls her breasts toward it. Her "feminine primitiveness" and the slick silver veneer of the sport-utility vehicle are in sharp contrast; the Freelander rapidly heads toward the future, leaving her in the past. In this single image, we are presented with a visual metaphor for the ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future) that is the most cutting side of the double-edged concept of the digital divide.[10]

If a sport-utility vehicle leaves people of African descent literally blowing in the wind, then the information age surely comes on like a tornado. Though meant to draw attention to true disparities, the well-meant concept of the digital divide is Janus-faced: there are indeed critical gaps in technological access and computer literacy that are comprehensible through the prisms of race, gender, socioeconomics, region, and age. Nonetheless, this paradigm is frequently reduced to race alone and thus falls all too easily in stride with preconceived ideas of black technical handicaps and "Western" technological superiority. Like the Himba woman

left eating the dust of technology, the underlying assumption of much digital divide rhetoric is that people of color, and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society.

The digital divide paradigm obscures the fact that uneven access to technology is a symptom of economic inequalities that predate the Arpanet (the prototype of the Internet) and the World Wide Web.[11] Moreover, this "myth of black disingenuity with technology," to borrow a phrase from historian of science and medicine Evelynn Hammonds, does not account for the centrality of black people's labor in modernization and industrialization as well as the historical truths of black participation in technological development.[12] Examples of such participation include the contributions of inventor Garret Morgan, who invented the traffic light in 1923; the vernacular chemistry of Madame C. J. Walker, who created a multi-million-dollar black beauty business; the creation of the Lingo computer language by programmer John Henry Thompson; and pioneering music production techniques.[13]

The racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the bodiless, color-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color. Neocritical narratives suggest that it is primitiveness or outmodedness, the obsolescence of something or someone else, that confirms the novel status of the virtual self, the cutting-edge product, or the high-tech society.

Post New

As Kalí Tal maintains, African diasporic history contains a wealth of theoretical paradigms that turn the reified binary between blackness and technology on its head, readily lending themselves to the task of constructing adequate frames of reference for contemporary theories of technoculture. From the early model of fractured consciousness offered by W. E. B. DuBois to the fractal patterns found in West African architecture, examples of black cultural prefigurations of our contemporary moment abound.[14]

For the purposes of this essay, Ishmael Reed's acclaimed 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* offers particularly fertile ground. The novel, which took the form of a detective story, was less a whodunit than an epistemological mystery. *Mumbo Jumbo* details one episode of an ongoing contest between the JGC's—the carriers of "jes grew," the meme of African diasporic culture—and the Atonists, supporters of the "Western civilization" mythol-

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ogy of world history. The novel's plot centers around competing efforts to encourage and restrain the itinerant cultural virus, "jes grew."

Reed has used the word *necromancy* to describe his project as a writer, defining it as "us[ing] the past to explain the present and to prophesize about the future."[15] Reed's understanding of a usable past runs counter to the futurism of the early twentieth century. Russian poet Kasimir Malevich described futurism as a way to pull oneself out of "the catacombs into the speed of our time. I affirm that whoever has not trod the path of Futurism as the exponent of modern life, is condemned to crawl for ever among the ancient graves and feed on the crusts of the past."[16] For Reed, on the other hand, the catacombs are not an archaic, occult place to be left behind for the clean light of modern science and technology but rather the gateway to a more complete understanding of the future. "Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in the tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future," he explained.[17] With this definition of necromancy, Reed presented a temporal orientation that seem to contradict discourses of the future predicated on either ignoring the past or rendering it as staid and stagnant. Unlike neocritics, Reed conjured "readings" of a living past, retained in the present and carried into the future.

The "jes grew" of *Mumbo Jumbo* is perhaps the best example of this. Reed borrows this phrase from civil rights activist and cultural theorist James Weldon Johnson, who used it to describe the proliferation of ragtime songs, commenting that they "jes grew" (or just grew). In the novel, "jes grew" refers to African diasporic cultures that live and evolve in the forms of gesture, music, dance, visual culture, epistemology, and language, crossing geography and generations by moving from carrier to carrier and thus threatening the knowledge monopoly of the "West": " 'Jes Grew' traversed the land in search of its Text: the lost liturgy seeking its litany. Its words, chants held in bondage by the mysterious Order. . . . Jes Grew needed its words to tell its carriers what it was up to. Jes Grew was an influence which sought its text, and whenever it thought it knew the location of its words and Labanotations it headed in that direction."[18] The missing text, which originated in ancient Africa, represents the opportunity to encode African diasporic vernacular culture and create a tangible repository of black experience.

Throughout the novel, PaPa LaBas—the novel's protagonist, spiritual detective, and proprietor of the Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, a HooDoo holistic health-gathering place—tracks "jes grew" as it seeks its text. Toward the novel's end, having discovered that the text has been destroyed, PaPa LaBas optimistically predicts, "We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this." At first take, this

statement seems to fall in line with the utopian aspirations of contemporary neocriticism. Yet LaBas is no unsophisticated booster of the new: this forecast is a vision of the future that is purposely inflected with tradition. Rather than despair when he finds out that the Text has been destroyed, LaBas believes that the next generation will be successful in creating a text that can codify black culture: past, present, and future. Rather than a "Western" image of the future that is increasingly detached from the past or, equally problematic, a future-primitive perspective that fantasizes an uncomplicated return to ancient culture, LaBas foresees the distillation of African diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed.

The "anachronism" that is an element of much of Reed's work is used to express a unique perspective on time and tradition. This effect is achieved in his writing through what he terms "synchronizing": "putting disparate elements into the same time, making them run in the same time, together."[19] Such an approach is characteristic of how technology works in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed's synchronous model defies the progressive linearity of much recent technocultural criticism. As Sämi Ludwig has observed, technologies exist independently of time in the novel; though it is set in the 1920s, the story contains references to technologies that will not be readily available until years later.[20] For example, Ludwig notes that a leader of the Wall Flower Order, the military arm of the Atonists, made use of video and television to monitor the progress of "jes grew" from his headquarters. In this case, technologies from the setting's future and the author's present inhabit a story situated in the past.

Reed's synchronicity extends to the placement of obsolete technologies in the present. Though not hardware as such, a communication technique called "knockings" is used by PaPa LaBas to receive information from beyond. Ludwig likens the "knockings" to radio waves; they could also be sensory perceptions, premonitions, or communiqués from the past that live through those who, like LaBas, continue to make use of them.[21] (Importantly, Reed does not pit his protagonists against other forms of technology. LaBas also makes use of hardware like his Kathedral radio, and a multicultural gang in the novel, the Mu'tafikah, which repatriates artworks to their countries of origin, employs dictaphones in its campaign.)[22] Reed might be said to use synchronicity to reprioritize technologies. Like his critique of the dominant mythos of "Western civ," his anachronistic use of technology in *Mumbo Jumbo* begs the question of what tools are valued by whom, and to what ends. With his innovative novel as an exemplar, Ishmael Reed has supplied a paradigm for an African diasporic technoculture.

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Afrofuturism

The contributions to this issue are perhaps those "future texts" hoped for by Papa LaBas in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. The text and images gathered here reflect African diasporic experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology. They excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture. In addition, these contributions, gathered under the term *Afrofuturism*, offer takes on digital culture that do not fall into the trap of the neocritics or the futurists of one hundred years past. These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them.

Many of the essays in this collection grew out of the relationships formed in an on-line community called Afrofuturism that I founded in the fall of 1998, and many of them expand, deploy, and take up the themes first discussed there. Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as "African American voices" with "other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come."[23] The term was chosen as the best umbrella for the concerns of "the list"—as it has come to be known by its members—"sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora."[24] The AfroFuturism listserv began as a project of the arts collective apogee with the goal of initiating dialogue that would culminate in a symposium called AfroFuturism|Forum.[25] Besides the community of thinkers, artists, and writers that has formed and been sustained through the listserv, perhaps its most meaningful function has been as an incubator of ideas.

The AfroFuturism list emerged at a time when it was difficult to find discussions of technology and African diasporic communities that went beyond the notion of the digital divide. From the beginning, it was clear that there was much theoretical territory to be explored. Early discussions included the concept of digital double consciousness; African diasporic cultural retentions in modern technoculture; digital activism and issues of access; dreams of designing technology based on African mathematical principles; the futuristic visions of black film, video, and music; the implications of the then-burgeoning MP3 revolution; and the relationship between feminism and Afrofuturism.

The contributors to this volume approach their themes from several angles: as unique analytical frameworks for interpreting black cultural production, as imagery of the near-future, as poetry. Essays by Alexander G. Weheliye and Ron Eglash consider identities of the digital age. With

> Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as "African American voices" with "other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come."

"'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,"
Weheliye reimagines one of the most vaunted contemporary social cate-
gories, that of the posthuman. Resisting a single totalizing elaboration
of posthumanity that is remarkably yet unsurprisingly similar to the West-
ern liberal subject, Weheliye turns away from preoccupations with the
ocular (in the form of the iconography of the computer screen and the
spectacle of visually apparent prosthetic posthumanity) in favor of the
aurality and orality of R&B music. Weheliye recoups contemporary R&B
as a witness to African diasporic life that articulates human longings and
at the same time reveals how these longings are mediated by technologies.
The vocoder is an example of this particular conjunction of "man" and
machine: "a speech-synthesizing device that renders the human voice
robotic," producing an "audibly machinic black voice" that amplifies
questions of race and technology. Weheliye offers a theory of digital age
subjectivity centered around the encoding of black diasporic forms in
terms of the new technologies that contribute to the daily realities of black
life.

Ron Eglash reconfigures another hardwired persona of the digital
age, that of the nerd or geek. Eglash argues that during a time when hack-
ers with business made inroads in the halls of power, access to geek iden-
tity may perhaps smooth the path to influence and capital. In his essay
"Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,"
Eglash traces the racial, gendered, and sexual identities that have adhered
to the figure of the nerd. The typically white male nerd, Eglash argues,
eked out a representational space between "primitivism," which cast peo-
ple of African descent as oversexed and "closer to nature" than culture,
and "orientalism," which stereotyped people of Asian descent as "under-
sexualized," overly abstract thinkers. Given that geek identity is carved out
in opposition to other racial and gender myths, Eglash considers whether
the appropriation of nerd identity can be a politically efficacious means of
gaining technocultural capital.

While the benefits of black nerd identity may be debatable, African
diasporic technophilia has a long history, according to Anna Everett. In
her essay "The Revolution Will Be Digitized," Everett argues that the
African diaspora that resulted from chattel slavery encouraged, long
before the term became chic, "self-sustaining virtual communities through
paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems" that sustained a
"diasporic consciousness." She claims that the networked consciousness
of the African diaspora of necessity prefigured the network consciousness
often hailed as one of the benefits of the Internet. She maintains that this
community consciousness persists "in cyberspace and the digital age."
According to Everett, even as the rhetoric of the digital divide prevailed,

1995 was a "watershed moment" for black connectivity, evidence of a "black technolust" that belied the prevailing narratives about race and technology in the public sphere. Everett believes that African diasporic communities in cyberspace offer the opportunity for fostering the black public sphere and for strengthening the links of the African diaspora using information technology as a tool of activism and social cohesion.

For Kalí Tal in "That Just Kills Me," the "information revolution" provides inspiration to reconsider existing texts as counternarratives to the futurism of neocriticism. Tal reflects on black militant near-future fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the generic characteristics of what she identifies as a distinct subgenre of cautionary tales are a utopian vision that is actualized through violence and the decimation of the white population, secret societies, and alternative uses of technology. In the works she discusses, the near future is a utopia in which blacks free themselves from the constraints of racism; the racist past and present are dystopic. This work begs the question of how social utopias might be variously imagined and how the past and present shape what we imagine as a positive future. Tal asserts that the writings she discusses by Sutton Griggs, George Schuyler, John A. Williams, and Chester Himes reveal a little-known history of African American futurism that both provides another lens for interpreting black literature and sets compelling precedents for the more widely known black science fiction that has emerged in the past forty years.

Novelist Nalo Hopkinson is an heir apparent to this tradition of literary speculation. She presents her own visions of the future in her critically acclaimed fiction, which is an exemplar of the living past that Ishmael Reed advocates. Hopkinson writes speculative fiction, mixing fantasy, horror, and science fiction with African mythology, spirituality, and culture. Noting that many of the metaphors of science and science fiction are derived from ancient Greek and Roman language origins, including the words *cyborg* and *telephone*, Hopkinson contemplates what words a "largely African diasporic culture might build, what stories its people might tell themselves about technology."[26] In the interview "Making the Impossible Possible," Hopkinson discusses how she writes speculative fiction that incorporates diverse African traditions. With her contributions, "Afro-Future—Dystopic Unity," "Mother Earth," and "Vertical," poet Tracie Morris offers elegiac reflections on "Western" science and technology. With this verse, Morris, a well-known performance poet and published writer, forges new directions with poetic language. She is less than sanguine about technoscience—each poem conjures the affect of loss and deception—linking it not to the promise of bright new futures but to biological abominations, genocidal campaigns, and environmental catastrophe.

The imagery of Tana Hargest and Fatimah Tuggar relies on digital-age tools to create visual speculation. Tuggar employs digital photomontage to construct a collision of time, place, and culture in a manner reminiscent of Ishmael Reed's synchronicity. Her images of northern Nigerian women in their everyday lives, using technologies both new and arcane, convey complex, often conflicting messages. Working with scale and color contrast, Tuggar hopes that the viewer will be conscious of, in the words of one reviewer, "the constructed nature of all images of Africa," in particular the continent's usual representation as an outmoded region, the opposite of what is modern and high-tech.[27] At first glance, Tuggar's cut-and-paste images seem to depict Nigerian women as victims of modern technology and Western imperialism, yet they ultimately reveal women as agents of technoculture. Placing traditional and more recent technologies on the same plane, Tuggar wants the viewer to understand them as tools that may have more in common than we think.

Tana Hargest uses computer-aided design technology to draw insights into the dilemmas of black life after the civil rights movement. Taking niche marketing to its speculative extreme, Hargest's project is a corporation, of which she is the CEO, called Bitter Nigger Inc. (BNI) that creates lifestyle products for African Americans living within the gilded cage of the color-blind aspirations of the information age. As she details in the letter to shareholders, BNI is comprised of several divisions, with one devoted to pharmaceuticals. The clever products developed by the pharmaceutical wing of BNI parody drugs like Claritin and Celebrex, the ads for which promise their own version of chemically enhanced utopia. In a manner reminiscent of George Schuyler's satirical novel *Black No More*, each BNI product identifies a "social problem" and offers a product as remedy; yet all have side effects. It isn't such a far leap from pharmacogenomics, the promise of drugs tailored for specific populations made possible by the coding of the human genome,[28] to Hargest's Tominex, a pill that helps the "buppie" consumer to "get along to go along." (The catch being that the pill is so big that in attempting to swallow the product/concept the consumer will choke.) Another product, "the Enforcer," is a behavior-correcting microchip implanted in whites that works to curb racism. The Big Brother aspect of this technology would seem to place it squarely in a dystopic world but, similar to the fiction that Kalí Tal discusses, this surveillance chip promises a utopian world in which racism is curtailed.

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Notes

1. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 148.

2. Timothy Leary and Eric Gullichsen, "High-Tech Paganism," in *Chaos and Cyber Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin, 1994), 236.

3. Andrew Ross, "The New Smartness," in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery (Seattle: Bay, 1994), 335. For a further critique of this type of posthumanity, see Alexander G. Weheliye's contribution to this issue, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music."

4. See also Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) and Brenda Laurel, *Computers As Theatre* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

5. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 36.

6. My critique of Stone's argument draws on insights provided by Kalí Tal, who makes a similar challenge to Sherry Turkle. See Kalí Tal, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture," www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Whitenes.html.

7. Lisa Nakamura, "'Where Do You Want to Go Today?': Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality," in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 15–26; Lisa Nakamura, "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," *Works and Days* (spring/fall 1995). *MUD* is an acronym for "multi-user domain" and *MOO* for "MUD, object-oriented." Both are virtual spaces or communities in which a participant choses an avatar or virtual character or assumes another identity. In her study of LambdaMOO, Nakamura observes that participants who chose a "race" as part of their identity profile

were subject to accusations of introducing "politics" into the virtual space. See "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," www.English.iup.edu/publications/works&days/index.html.

8. Nakamura, "'Where Do You Want to Go Today?'" 25 (emphasis in original).

9. Ibid., 21–22, 16.

10. Unfortunately, Land Rover of South Africa (now a division of the Ford Motor Company) would not grant permission for the reproduction of the advertisement referred to here. For more information about this controversial ad and to view the image, see *Adbusters*, no. 34 (March–April 2001): 38. It also appeared in "Bust in the Wind," *Harpers*, no. 1815 (August 2001): 23.

11. Alondra Nelson, "Braving the New World–AfroFuturism: Beyond the Digital Divide," in *Race and Public Policy*, ed. Makani Themba (Oakland, Calif.: Applied Research Center, 2000): 37–40.

12. Evelynn Hammonds, interview with author, 23 April 2001, Cambridge, Mass.

13. James C. Williams, *At Last, Recognition in America: A Reference Handbook of Unknown Black Inventors and Their Contribution to America* (Chicago: B.C.A., 1978), 1:27–28. For more on John Thompson, see www.lingoworks.com. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), esp. chap. 3.

14. Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

15. Ishmael Reed, interview by Gaga [Mark S. Johnson], in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, ed. Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 51.

16. Kasimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 169.

17. John O'Brien, "Ishmael Reed," in Dick and Singh, *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 16.

18. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972; reprint, New York: Scribner, 1996), 211.

19. *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 53.

20. Sämi Ludwig, *Concrete Language: Intercultural Communication in Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Warrior Woman" and Ishmael Reed's "Mumbo Jumbo"* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 320.

21. Ludwig, *Concrete Language*, 319.

22. Ibid.

23. The term *Afro-futurism* was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in an introductory essay that accompanied an interview with cultural critics Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and theorist and sci-fi writer Samuel Delany. See "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in "Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture," ed. Mark Dery, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94.4 (1993): 735–78; quotation at 738. Though this catchall term was first used by Dery in 1993, the currents that comprise it existed long before. See Kowdo Eshun, "Motion Capture (Interview)," in *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, 175–93 (London: Quartet, 1998). An extensive list of Afrofuturist resources has been compiled by Kalí Tal at www.afrofuturism.net.

24. This phrase is taken from my description of the listserv, which can be found at www.groups.yahoo.com/group/afrofuturism.

25. The focus of the listserv was initially on science fiction metaphors and technocultural production in the African diaspora and expanded from there into a freewheeling discussion of any and all aspects of contemporary black life. A series of moderators—including Paul D. Miller, Nalo Hopkinson, Ron Eglash, and David Goldberg—gave generously of their time and energy in periodically setting themes for the list to consider in the first year of its existence. Now three years old and still going strong, the AfroFuturism list continues to evolve: recent moderators have included Sheree Renee Thomas and Alexander Weheliye.

Organized by Alondra Nelson, AfroFuturism|Forum, "a critical dialogue on the future of black cultural production," was held at New York University on 18 September 1999 as part of the Downtown Arts Festival. This project was made possible by assistance from the Peter Norton Family Foundation as well as the American Studies and Africana Studies programs at NYU. The panels focused on various aspects of African diasporic digital culture. Participants included Beth Coleman, Kodwo Eshun, Leah Gilliam, Jennie C. Jones, Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Kobena Mercer, Tracie Morris, Erika Dalya Muhammad, Alondra Nelson, Simon Reynolds, Tricia Rose, Franklin Sirmans, and Reggie Cortez Woolery.

26. "Filling the Sky with Islands: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson," www.space.com/sciencefiction/books/hopkinson_intv_000110.html.

27. Amanda Carlson, "Amongst and Between Culture: The Art of Fatimah Tuggar," unpublished essay, 1999.

28. "This Heart Drug Is Designed for African Americans," *Business Week*, 26 March 2001.

Fatimah Tuggar

"The Spinner and the Spindle," 1995

"Village Spells," 1996

Fatimah Tuggar

"In Touch," 1998

"Feenin"

POSTHUMAN VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY
BLACK POPULAR MUSIC

Alexander G.
Weheliye

Book titles tell the story. The original subtitle for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "The Man Who Was a Thing." In 1910 appeared a book by Mary White Ovington called *Half a Man*. Over one hundred years after the appearance of Stowe's book, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, by John A. Williams, was published. Quickskill thought of all the changes that would happen to make a "Thing" into an "I Am." Tons of paper. An Atlantic of blood. Repressed energy of anger that would form enough sun to light a solar system. A burnt-out black hole. A cosmic slave hole.
—Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*

If you listen close to the music, you'll find . . . my syste-systic humanistic sound to prove you, yeeaah.
—Zapp, "It Doesn't Really Matter"

This essay takes up N. Katherine Hayles's challenge to seize this critical moment in order "to contest what the posthuman means . . . before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them," by closely examining her recent text, *How We Became Posthuman*.[1] I do this because Hayles's volume provides the most elaborate history and theory of the posthuman, even while her framework embodies the "trains of thought" she herself queries. In other words, Hayles's own formulations are on the way to becoming hegemonic, at least in the discrepant disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that make up the postdiscipline of cultural studies. I begin with two contentions. The first concerns the literal and virtual whiteness of cyber-theory.[2] The second establishes at the very least an aporetic relationship between New World black cultures and the category of the "human." In addition, this essay also seeks to realign the hegemony of visual media in academic considerations of virtuality by shifting the emphasis to the aural, allowing us to conjecture some of the manifold ways in which black cultural production engages with informational technologies.

This is followed by a discussion of the distinct status of the "human" in Afro-diasporic politico-cultural formations. Then my attention turns to the foremost theorist of a specifically black posthumanity: the British music and cultural critic Kodwo Eshun.[3] Eshun's work provides an occasion to imagine alternative stagings of the human and posthuman found in

the crosscurrents and discontinuities marking the history of African American music and the informational technologies in which they have been embodied over the course of the twentieth century. To this end, my focus will be on the role of the vocoder, a speech-synthesizing device that renders the human voice robotic, in R&B, since the audibly machinic black voice amplifies the vexed interstices of race, sound, and technology. In contrast to other forms of black popular music (jazz or hip hop, for instance), R&B, especially current manifestations of this genre, has received little critical attention. I would like to amend this neglect by insisting on the genre's importance as a pivotal space for the coarticulation of black subjectivity and information technologies. The interaction between the audibly mechanized and more traditionally melismatic and "soulful" voice in contemporary R&B indicates a different form of posthumanism than the one suggested by cybertheory, a posthumanism not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity, and a subjectivity located in the sonic arena rather than the ocular.

How We Were Never Human: Race and the (Post) Human

It is obviously nothing new to declare that cybertheory has little if anything to say about the intricate processes of racial formation, whether U.S.–based or within a more global framework. While gender and sexuality have been crucial to theories of both cyberspace and the posthuman, the absence of race is usually perfunctorily remarked and of little consequence to these analyses. Critics such as Joe Lockard and Kalí Tal have dealt with the erasure of race from these studies, but their work remains ghettoized rather than integrated into the mainstream of cybertheory.[4] Hayles is no exception in this regard: while gender takes center stage in much of Hayles's discussion of these cultural and technological constellations, her analysis seems to be symptomatic of the field as a whole. Although it is not Hayles's project per se to interrogate race in relation to virtuality, the erasure of race severely limits how we conceive of the complex interplay between "humans" and informational technologies.

Hayles's general argument provides a trenchant scrutiny of "how information lost its body," that is, the manifold ways in which information is thought to transcend materiality, continuing the Cartesian tradition of placing mind over matter, only in this framework the content of techno-informational flows replaces the "human" mind (2). Not only does this particular form of disembodiment extend the Cartesian mind/matter dichotomy, it also preserves the idea of the liberal subject, represented as *having* a body, but not *being* a body (4). Hayles draws her definition of

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subjectivity from C. B. Macpherson's classic, *A Theory of Possessive Individualism*, wherein he delineates the liberal the subject as "the proprietor of his own person, or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. . . . The human essence is freedom from the will of others, and freedom is the function of possession."[5] Summarizing Macpherson's take on Hobbes and Locke, Hayles asserts that the liberal subject was thought to predate the market by virtue of wielding ownership over the self (the natural self); such ownership resisted corruption by market forces and was taken to be the unalienable natural right of "man" (3). Still, as both Hayles and Macpherson note, this "human" is very much a product of the market and in no way anterior to its forces, especially in the United States, where citizenship and personhood were, and in some ways still are, predicated upon property ownership, and thus "freedom is the function of possession." Though careful to stress that the liberal version of selfhood is only that—one particular way of thinking about what it means to be "human"—and not wishing to resuscitate this rendition of subjectivity, in the end Hayles unwillingly privileges this modality, for it serves as her sine qua non for human subjectivity. Put differently, Hayles needs the hegemonic Western conception of humanity as a heuristic category against which to position her theory of posthumanism, in the process recapitulating the ways in which the Western liberal theory of the "human," instantiated in the eighteenth century, came to represent "humanity" sui generis.

According to Hayles, the posthuman subject renders this conception of the "natural self" obsolete, since discrete boundaries and unmitigated agency give way to an "amalgam . . . of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). While I sympathize with Hayles's desire to redraft this hegemonic Western version of personhood, her singular focus on this particular historical composite unnecessarily weighs down her project, since the posthuman frequently appears as little more than the white liberal subject in techno-informational disguise. Even when giving examples of paradigmatic posthumans, Hayles falls back on white masculinist constructions by citing the Six Million Dollar Man and Robocop as avatars of the posthuman condition; at the very least, the category might have been expanded by including the Bionic Woman. Similarly, in the readings of classical science fiction (Philip K. Dick) and cyberpunk narratives (William Gibson and Neal Stephenson) or in the redaction of the history of cybernetics, Hayles reinscribes white masculinity as the (human) point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state. It seems that one has to be always already "free from the will of others" (or think that one is) in order to mutate into the fusion of heterogeneous agents comprising the posthuman state of being, thereby excluding all

cultural and political formations in which the history of subjectivity is necessarily yoked to the will—and/or the whips and chains—of others.[6] Certainly, New World black subjects cannot inhabit this version of selfhood in quite the same manner as the "white boys" of Hayles's canon due to slavery, colonialism, racism, and segregation, since these forces render the very idea that one could be "free from the will of others" null and void.[7]

Ironically, the specters of race and slavery haunt the margins of Hayles's argument through the use of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* at a strategic point in her discussion. Here is how she describes her project: "This book is a 'rememory' in the sense of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: putting back together parts that have lost touch with one another and reaching out toward a complexity too unruly to fit into zeros and ones" (13). However, Hayles neglects to explore the implications of this text, especially in regard to notions of humanity as they are refracted through the history of slavery. Morrison's novel highlights both the absence and the construction of what we now associate with the liberal humanist subject, depicting the dehumanizing effects of slavery on particular black subjects and their struggle to reconstruct their fractured bodies and subjectivities in slavery's aftermath. But the novel also insists that there can be no uncomplicated embrace of liberal humanist subject positions by black people after slavery. The literal dehumanization of black people through chattel slavery, as well as the legal, political, anthropological, scientific, economic, and cultural forces supporting and enforcing this system, afforded black subjects no easy passage to the sign of the human. To phrase this conundrum in the spirit of Morrison's narrative, once your animal characteristics have been measured against human ones in the pages of the plantation ledger, desiring the particular image of humanity on the other side of this very ledger seems, to put it mildly, futile. Or as Saidiya Hartman describes the transition from "subhuman" to "human": "the transubstantiation of the captive into the volitional subject, chattel into proprietor, and the circumscribed body of blackness into the disembodied and abstract universal seems improbable, if not impossible."[8] Consequently, the human has had a very different meaning in black culture and politics than it has enjoyed in mainstream America.

Because theories of posthumanity are so closely associated with theorizations of cyberspace, computer-mediated communication often appears to be the precondition for becoming posthuman. Even though critics such as Friedrich Kittler, Lisa Gitelman, Sadie Plant, and Steven Connor have cast a wider historical and conceptual net by analyzing film, the phonograph, the telephone, and the radio as informational technologies, these works largely assume the disciplinary guise of media theory and/or history

and not cybertheory.[9] Moreover, cybertheory frequently positions computer-mediated communication as the be-all and end-all of virtuality and informational technologies. To be sure, *How We Became Posthuman* skillfully fuses the scientific and literary discourses of the posthuman, yet save for canonical science fiction and contemporary cyberpunk, the traditional cultural topoi of cybertheory, the book examines little outside of the world of cybernetics. Incorporating other informational media, such as sound technologies, counteracts the marginalization of race rather than rehashing the whiteness, masculinity, and disembodiment of cybernetics and informatics.[10]

In one of the first anthologies specifically concerned with racialized subjects and technology, the editors introduce the volume with the following cogent observation:

> *Technicolor* presents a full spectrum of stories about how people of color produce, transform, appropriate, and consume technologies in their everyday lives. In order to locate these stories, we found it necessary to use a broader understanding of technology, and to include not only those thought to create revolutions (e. g., information technologies), but also those with which people come in contact in their daily lives. For when we limit discussions about technology simply to computer hardware and software, we see only a "digital divide" that leaves people of color behind.[11]

For my own purposes, these alternate configurations are most readily found in the histories of sound technologies and their interaction with twentieth–century black cultural practices. These counterhistories do not adhere to the effacing of embodiment that Hayles exposes in cybernetics and informatics; they gesture toward a more complex interaction between embodiment and disembodiment, the human and posthuman.

If we follow Hayles's notion of the posthuman as an embodied virtuality, then recording and reproducing human voices certainly falls into the force field of the posthuman. Because technologically mediated human voices were considered nonhuman due to their mechanical embodiment, various cultural mechanisms had to be instantiated in order to reinscribe humanness and presence; early discourses on the phonograph testify to this embodied virtuality, picturing the voice emanating from the phonograph as nonhuman and ghostly. This tension between the nonhuman and human, presence and absence, reaches its pinnacle in the traffic between black popular music and the various recording and reproduction technologies it has been transmitted through over the course of the twentieth century. From the onset of the mass production and distribution of recorded sound in the 1920s, black popular music functioned as the embodiment of the virtual voice. Instead of merely producing a disem-

bodied virtuality *avant la lettre*, the phonograph harbors an always-embodied virtuality, particularly in relation to black voices. Paradoxically, black voices are materially disembodied by the phonograph and other sound technologies, while black subjects are inscribed as the epitome of embodiment through a multitude of U.S. cultural discourses.

The Souls of Black Folks

Afro-diasporic thinking has not evinced the same sort of distrust and/or outright rejection of "man" in its universalist, post-Enlightenment guise as Western antihumanist or posthumanist philosophies. Instead, black humanist discourses emphasize the historicity and mutability of the "human" itself, gesturing toward different, catachrestic, conceptualizations of this category.[12] However, wielding this particular and historically contingent classification should not be read, as is often the case, as a mere uncritical reiteration, as if there were such a thing, of humanist discourses. Black discourses have consistently laid claim to "humanity" in multifarious ways, starting with Phyllis Wheatley's poetry at the end of the eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, as exemplified by the works of David Walker, Maria Stewart, Martin Delaney, and Anna Julia Cooper. While invocations of humanism in the twentieth century surely stem from different motivations than those historically preceding them, these ideas are elaborated by such thinkers as W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Aimé Césaire, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Edouard Glissant, to name a few. Far from renouncing "humanity," these intellectuals have all focused on this category. Clearly this emphasis on "humanity" results from the histories of slavery and colonialism and the racial, gender, and sexual violence ensuing from these forces. Indeed, as Ishmael Reed's epigraph to this essay conveys, the "middle passages" of black culture to and in the New World are not marked so much by "humanity" as by an acute lack thereof; a "black hole" of humanity, so to speak. Since black subjects were deemed the radical obverse of enlightened and rational "man," various black discourses have sought to appropriate this category. In the words of Frantz Fanon: "We must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."[13] This new "man" is the subject of Ishmael Reed's "cosmic slave hole," where "humanity" neither begins nor ends with the white masculine liberal subject. Thus, any consideration of the posthuman should contemplate the status of humanity from the vantage point of this "cosmic slave hole."

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Afro-Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter's attempt to recast the human sciences in relation to a new conception of "man" provides contexts in which to think the "human" that not only bridge the ever widening gap between the cognitive life sciences and humanities but also incorporate the colonial and racialist histories of the "human."[14] Tracing the *longue durée* of Western modernity, Wynter maintains that the religious conception of the self gave way to two modes of secularized subjectivity: first, the Cartesian "Rational Man" and then, beginning "at the end of the eighteenth century, . . . Man as a selected being and natural organism . . . as the universal human, 'man as man'" ("Beyond the Word," 645).[15] In the discursive and material universe of "biological idealism," the second of Wynter's modes of secularized being, black subjects served as limit cases by which "man" could define himself as the universal "human" ("Disenchanting Discourse," 436). Here, "man" appears as "man" via dis-identification, wherein whiteness connotes the full humanity only gleaned in relation to the lack of humanity in blackness. Moreover, "the black population groups of the New World [acted] as the embodied bearers of Ontological lack to the secular model of being, Man, as the conceptual Other" ("Beyond the Word," 641).[16] Because New World black subjects were denied access to the position of humanity for so long, "humanity" refuses to signify any ontological primacy within Afro-diasporic discourses. In black culture this category becomes a designation that shows its finitudes and exclusions very clearly, thereby denaturalizing the "human" as a universal formation while at the same time laying claim to it. Put differently, the moment in which black people enter into humanity, this very idea loses its ontological thrust because its limitations are rendered abundantly clear. Black humanism disenchants "Man as Man," bringing "into being different modes of the *human*" because it deploys the very formulation of "man" as catachresis ("Disenchanting Discourse," 466). Current debates about the posthuman might do well to incorporate these ontological others into their theories in order to better situate and analyze the porous perimeters of the "human."

Black humanism has found one of its most persistent articulations in the vexed discursive entanglements around black people's souls over the course of the last 150 years, most markedly in relation to black popular music. In *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, Lindon Barrett holds that the black voice functions as a figure of value within African American culture, particularly as it is contrasted with the lack of value ascribed to blackness in American mainstream culture.[17] In a complex argument, Barrett distinguishes *the singing voice* from the *signing voice* of Euro-American alphabetical literacy, writing that the singing voice "provides a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in

the New World for a productive, recognized self" (57).[18] The *signing voice*, on the other hand, represents the literacy of the white Enlightenment subject redacted above. As in Hayles's account of Western thinking, the *signing voice* signals full humanity, whiteness, and disembodiment, where the *singing voice* metonymically enacts blackness, embodiment, and subhumanity. For Barrett the corporeality—"sly alterity," as he terms it— furnishes the black singing voice's most destabilizing feature (58). In this sense, the black *singing voice* suggests a rather different access to the category of "humanity" than the *signing voice* and in the process undermines the validity of the liberal subject as the sign for the "human," providing a fully embodied version thereof. Thus black subjectivity appears as the antithesis to the Enlightenment subject by virtue of not only having a body but by being the body—within Enlightenment discourses blackness is the body and nothing else. But what happens once the black voice becomes disembodied, severed from its source, recontextualized, and appropriated? All these things occurred when the first collections of transcribed spirituals became readily available for public consumption during the Civil War and continued with the recording and reproduction through various media of the black voice in the twentieth century.

Far from being transmitted "in [a] startlingly authentic form," as Barrett will have it, the black singing voice, decoupled from its human source and placed in the context of spiritual collections and subsequently phonograph records, insinuates a much more overdetermined and unwieldy constellation within both black and mainstream American cultural discourses. As both Ronald Radano and Jon Cruz have shown, spirituals, once transcribed and compiled, served both white and black abolitionist purposes as embodiments of black humanity.[19] Black sacred and later secular music took on two simultaneous functions: proving black peoples' soul and standing in for the soul of all U.S. culture, keeping the racially particular and national universal in constant tension. Thus spirituals ushered in a long history of white appropriations of black music, ranging from the "slumming" patrons of the Cotton Club, Norman Mailer's "white negroes," to today's hip hop "whiggers." All of this goes to show that while the black singing voice harbors moments of value, as suggested in Barrett's scheme, it can hardly be construed as a purely authentic force, particularly once delocalized and offered up for national and/or international consumption. The "soul," and by extension "humanity," of black subjects, therefore, is often imbricated in white mainstream culture, customarily reflecting an awareness of this very entanglement.

Taking the negative ontological placement of black subjects in Western modernity as his point of departure, Kodwo Eshun constructs an argument that posits a specifically black constellation of the posthuman in

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which New World black subjects have privileged access to the posthuman because they were denied the status of human for so long.[20] Eshun belongs to a growing number of critics exploring the intersections of black cultural production, technology, and science fiction collected under the rubric Afrofuturism, including Greg Tate, Sheree Thomas, Mark Dery, Carol Cooper, Nalo Hopkinson, Paul D. Miller (DJ Spooky), and the many contributors to the AfroFuturism Web site and listserv.[21] Eshun's 1998 volume *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* represents the most extensive manifesto of this movement, tracing different forms of alienness and posthumanity through various genres of post–World War II black popular music, including jazz, funk, hip hop, techno, and jungle, as well as providing a dazzling account of the technicity of black music. Eshun claims that the sign of the human harbors a negative significance, if any, in Afrofuturist musical configurations. In these genres, he argues, shifting forms of nonhuman otherworldliness replace the human as the central characteristic of black subjectivity:

> The idea of slavery as an alien abduction means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the eighteenth century. The mutation of African male and female slaves in the eighteenth century into what became negro, and into an entire series of humans that were designed in America. That whole process, the key behind it all is that in America none of these humans were *designated* human. It's in the music that you get this sense that most African-Americans *owe nothing to the status of the human*. There is this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category. (192–93; emphasis mine)

As a result of the dehumanizing forces of slavery, in Eshun's frame of reference, certain kinds of black popular music stage black subjectivity, bypassing the modality of the human in the process of moving from the subhuman to the posthuman. According to Eshun, black posthumanism stands in stark contrast to the strong humanist strand found in a host of black cultural styles, ranging from the majority of African American literature to the history of soul and the blues. Eshun describes these two modes of thinking as Afro-diasporic futurism and the humanist future-shock absorbers of mainstream black culture. Eshun's important work unearths some of the radical strands of black music that refuse to uncritically embrace the Western conception of "the human," are largely instrumental, and therefore do not rely on the black voice as a figure of value.

In Eshun's argument these allegedly black humanist discourses continually appeal to humanity, at the same time positing the "human" as their Platonic ideal: "Like brussels sprouts, humanism is good for you, nourishing, nurturing, soulwarming—and from Phyllis Wheatley to

R. Kelly, present-day R&B is a perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species" (6). While both of these schools of Afro-diasporic cultural discourses (Afro-diasporic futurism and humanist future-shock absorbers) surely exist, they are not quite as categorically antagonistic as Eshun imagines them to be.[22] If we consider the history of black American popular music, we can see both forces, the humanist and posthumanist, at work. From nineteenth-century spirituals through the blues, jazz, soul, hip hop, and techno, the human and the posthuman are in constant dynamic tension. It is precisely because slavery rendered the category of the human suspect that the reputedly humanist postslavery black cultural productions cannot and do not attribute the same meaning to humanity as white American discourses. These inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject.[23] Eshun, in his move to polemicize against black humanism, takes the performance of the human in black literature and music at face value, leaving behind its most radical gesture of marking the boundaries and limitations of the human itself.

Hypersoul

Even though numerous cultural discourses have done their best to authenticate and naturalize the soul of black popular music, the musical practices themselves frequently defy these authenticating mechanisms by embracing new technologies, hybridities, and self-consciousness about the performative aspects of soul. In order to provide more specific examples of how the definitions of the human and posthuman might shift if we look and listen beyond the topical and analytical borders of cybertheory and Eshun's Afrofuturist figurations, I will now turn my attention to contemporary examples of black popular music's engagement with informational technologies. I am most interested in the status of the recorded voice in contemporary mainstream R&B, because this genre, pace Eshun, does not so much absorb the "future shock" of Afrofuturism as reconstruct the black voice in relation to information technologies. While singers remain central to the creation of black music, they do so only in conjunction with the overall sonic architecture, especially in the turn away from the lead singer as the exclusive artist to more producer-driven and collaborative musical productions. This has its scattered origins in music designated by terms such as the Motown or Philly sounds rather than the naming of oeuvres in relation to particular singers. Most Motown artists, for example, collabo-

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rated with Dozier/Holland/Dozier, Norman Whitfield shaped the sonic provenances of the Temptations' early 1970s work, and Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff were instrumental in constructing the sound of the O'Jays and other artists on the Philly International label, which ensured that the technological mediation and creation of soul became part and parcel of the musical performance.

Currently the most prominent R&B producers, such as Missy Elliot, Sean "Puffy" Combs, Timbaland, Rodney Jerkins (Darkchild), or the Neptunes, have become omnipresent on the vocal tracks of R&B and music videos for the songs they produce. Jerkins routinely announces his songs as Darkchild "products"; on Destiny's Child's "Say My Name," for example, he states "Darkchild 99" in the opening sequence of the track.[24] Often producers provide guest raps, and the artists themselves acknowledge their production wizards in the lyrics, providing something akin to aural signatures.[25] On Ginuwine's "Same Ol' G," Timbaland half sings and half raps, with the performer constantly sonically inscribing his own name so that the line between performer and producer vanishes into thin musical air.[26] The human voice has signaled presence, fullness, and the coherence of the subject, not only in Western philosophical discourses but also in popular music and popular music criticism. Other genres of popular music attempt to erase their technological mediation and embodiment, remaining mired in the myth of what Ted Gracyk terms "recording realism," which insists on the authenticity, integrity, and naturalness of the recorded performance.[27] But no recorded performances, not even live recordings, are "real"—or even representations thereof. Rather, they are virtual productions created through interactions of musicians and listeners with recording and reproduction technologies. By embracing new technologies such as remixing, scratching, and sampling, black popular music producers and performers persistently emphasize the virtuality of any form of recorded music. Acknowledging the effects of these technologies on these musical practices, black popular musical genres make their own virtuality central to the musical texts. Instead of pulling the strings in the background—that is, being disembodied—these producers, who plug the performers into the technological apparatus, take front and center stage with the artists. This creates a composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.[28]

Since the early 1990s, R&B has undergone significant changes due to its symbiotic relationship with hip hop, most clearly audible in the numerous guest rappers on R&B records.[29] While guest raps appeared in R&B as early as Melle Mel's stint on Chaka Khan's 1984 Prince cover version, "I Feel for You," or Rakim's on Jody Watley's "Friends" in 1989, these

collaborations increased exponentially in the following decade; now the majority of mainstream R&B records feature some presence by rappers.[30] Hip hop aesthetics have also exerted an enormous influence on the instrumental and studio production techniques as well as altering the singing styles of current R&B.[31] As R&B producers began to utilize samples of rhythm tracks from old recordings, in much the same way that hip hop records do, singers, in turn, adjusted their vocal styles to the rhythm of the sample rather than the melody. Mary J. Blige and her producers pioneered this trend: her first two albums made elaborate use of samples and Blige's vocals followed suit; she refers to it as singing over beats as opposed to crooning traditional songs. Suspended between the mellifluous R&B phrasing and the rhythmical intonations of rapping, Blige's vocal style has been widely emulated.[32] In some sense, then, this focus on rhythmic dimensions of vocalization moves the R&B singing voice closer to the stereotypically mechanical, since the machinic is often associated with rigid rhythmic structures and not the "human" expansiveness of melody and harmony.[33]

As the 1990s progressed, producers such as Missy Elliot and Timbaland, Rodney Jerkins (Darkchild), and She'kespere Briggs increasingly created their "own" adventurous studio sounds instead of relying on prerecorded beats, still emphasizing rhythm first and foremost. The lyrical content of R&B has also undergone major shifts, especially when compared to the late sixties and early seventies, stressing designer clothes, expensive cars, and hypersexuality, among other things.[34] This leads Bat to coin a new term for current R&B: "*Hypersoul*, which is marked on all levels by antagonism towards soul values. Soul's religious and spiritual undercurrent is often pushed aside in favour of brazen aspirational materialism (aka the 'playa' culture). Many tracks flaunt an obsession with hi-tech consumer gadgetry, especially mobile phones."[35] As opposed to most other critics of recent R&B, Bat attempts to take the genre on its own terms, conjecturing its reconceptualization of older notions of "soul." Both the rhythmic singing and the increased attention to material goods render R&B machinic rather than traditionally "soulful" or "human." Thus contemporary R&B suggests a mechanized desire at the cusp of the human and posthuman. Furthermore, R&B's engagement with various technologies, both in its production and its lyrics, provides several avenues to configuring human beings so that they can be seamlessly articulated with (intelligent) machines (Hayles, 3). In the final section, I will examine the general role of informational technologies in current black popular music and then focus on the use of vocoders to better ascertain the specificity of the human-machine interaction in R&B.

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To say that communications and other technologies are leading actors on the stage of contemporary R&B would amount to an understatement of gargantuan proportions; lyrically, hardly a track exists that does not mention cellular phones, beepers, two-way pagers, answering machines, various surveillance gadgets, e-mail messages, and the Internet, stressing the interdependence of contemporary interpersonal communication and informational technologies. As a result, these technologies appear both as Brechtian "A-effects" and as sonic "cinema verité" that depict the "reality" of current technologically mediated life worlds.[36] On "Beep Me 911," for instance, Missy Elliot and 702 ask an unnamed lover to beep or call them on the cell phone if she or he still loves them, the 911 functioning here as an indicator of both urgency and monumental desire.[37] Destiny's Child admonishes an unwanted admirer, a "Bug-a-Boo," to stop beeping their pagers, leaving them telephone messages, and sending them e-mail; if this techno-informational terrorism continues, they threaten to block the caller's number, have MCI cut the phone poles, throw their pager out the window, and have AOL make their e-mail stop.[38] In a different vein, the members of Blaque describe their sexual superiority by insisting that their "love goes boom like an 808," a drum machine, used on countless hip hop, house, and techno recordings, that does not mimic "human" capacities but is celebrated for its sonic and rhythmic deepness. Blaque's sexual braggadocio transforms them into "love machines" who can only describe the velocity of their lovemaking via the machinic, thus rendering the TR-808 drum machine more "human" than the human subjects themselves.[39] The increased prominence of these technological artifacts in R&B indicates the enculturation (the ways in which technological artifacts are incorporated into the quotidian) of informational technologies in cultural practices that diverge from Hayles's restricted scientific and literary archive and Eshun's alien otherworlds.

This penchant for the machinic in R&B can also be found in the genre's use of cellular telephones both as a voice distortion mechanism and as part of the sonic tapestry. Ginuwine and Aaliyah's duet, "Final Warning," lyrically not only revolves around phone numbers and cell phones, but their staged lover's quarrel is continually interspersed by sounds of a ringing cellular telephone.[40] This ringing, rather than functioning merely as sonic similitude, forms an integral element of the rhythmic dimension of this already complexly syncopated track. The ringing of the cell phone on this recording, however, is an exception rather than the rule. Generally, cellular phones have entered R&B and hip hop—the informational technological gadget de rigueur in these genres—both as a

textual topic and, perhaps more importantly, as a voice distortion device. Nowhere is this clearer than on rap supergroup the Firm's "Phone Tap."[41] Chronicling the FBI surveillance of the imaginary gangster personas the rappers adopted for this project, the track features a slow beat and a Mexican-style acoustic guitar reminiscent of western film soundtracks. The rappers deliver their lyrics through a muffled microphone approximating voices on a cell phone, which achieves a haunting effect that aestheticizes surveillance practices by incorporating them into the musical text as much as it criticizes their utter infiltration of contemporary social and political formations. Most other uses of the "cell phone effect" are more benign but still noteworthy, in that they have realigned notions of voice and soul within the contemporary black popular musical landscape. Lately, almost all mainstream R&B productions feature parts of the lead or background vocal performance sounding as if they were called in over a cell phone as opposed to produced in a state-of-the-art recording studio.[42] This use of the cell phone has become so ubiquitous that in a recent article in the *Village Voice*, Scott Woods feels compelled to classify all female pop R&B performers as "Cell-Phone Girls."[43]

The "cell phone effect" marks the performers' recorded voices as technologically embodied. Instead of trying to downplay the technological mediation of the recording, the cell phone effect does away with any notion of the selfsame presence of the voice, imbuing, as Simon Reynolds points out, the production of the voice in contemporary R&B with a strong sense of "anti-naturalism."[44] Reynolds's argument regards the overall treatment of the voice in R&B, but the cell phone effect holds a particular prominence in this scheme as an "index of technological audibility."[45] As Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson explain, in most popular musical genres technology is frowned upon, creating a hierarchy of what counts as technological: "Such distinctions almost always proceed by rendering the technological components utilized in their favored forms invisible as technologies—they are more 'real' or 'natural,' absorbed wholly into those that play them as expressive extensions of the performing body" (112). The cell phone effect resists such principles of the "real," choosing instead to stage voice-distortion devices as both technological *and* "expressive extensions of the performing body." More importantly, the cell phone effect fails to define technological mediation and "realism" as warring opponents; instead, R&B construes these factors as thoroughly interfaced.

The technological demarcation of the voice in contemporary R&B also appears in the revival of the vocoder. Au courant in the early 1980s, this speech-synthesizing device can also be heard on a spate of recent pop and dance music recordings.[46] First used in popular music by such

artists as Kraftwerk and Herbie Hancock, it exploded in the early 1980s, particularly in the electro genre, and today is in many ways a sonic index of the early 1980s' zeitgeist. The vocoder might best be thought of as a "low technology," to use Gilbert and Pearson's phrase, which achieves analog-sounding effects via digital means (122–28).[47] The use of this sonic technology forms a part of a tendency to valorize older and obsolete machinery of musical production because they sound "warmer" and more "human, " which is ironic given that vocoders make the human voice sound robotic, in a now seemingly quaint C3P0 way. Because the vocoder carries undertones of nostalgia for a more "technologically innocent" era (the 1980s), it lends an aura of increased "humanity" and "soulfulness" to the singer's voice. Current invocations of the mechanized voice in black popular music render the vocoder less technological than the cell phone effect, for instance, since it sounds like a historical relic. I would now like to analyze several specific instances of vocoder use in R&B, tracing the shift from analog to digital and its ramifications on questions of soul and virtual embodiment.

Zapp was a late-seventies and early-eighties group associated with George Clinton in its infancy but later making a name for itself by virtue of heavily mechanized funk and extensive vocoder use. In fact, Zapp "embodies" the vocoder like no other musical group, at least in black popular music, since the group's idiosyncrasy was the prominence of this device on all its recordings. Today Zapp is largely known through samples of its funk oeuvre, the group's most widely recognized tracks, "More Bounce to the Ounce" and "Dancefloor," appearing on a number of hip hop tracks. EPMD, for instance, built a career on sampling bits and pieces of Zapp bass lines, rhythms, and vocals; Zapp's leader, Roger Troutman, even lent his mechanized voice to Tupac Shakur's 1996 megahit, "California Love."[48] However, Zapp also left a mark on R&B with two luscious but now somewhat dated-sounding vocoder ballads, "Computer Love" and "I Want to Be Your Man."[49] These two ballads exert a more subtle influence than the hip hop samples redacted above but provide inspiration for the reemergence of the vocoder in R&B.

In contrast to most other tracks in the Zapp canon, "Computer Love" features not only the vocoderized voice of Roger Troutman but also the "human voices" of the Gap Band's Charlie Wilson and Zapp's longtime background singer Shelley Murdock, who enjoyed a brief solo career in the 1980s. "Computer Love" commences with a very deep vocoder vocif-eration of "computer love," followed by what sounds like simulated scratching and a vocoderized voice in a much higher key intoning, "com-puterized." Then we hear the higher machinic voice articulating the title in conjunction with Charlie Wilson, creating a dialogue between the two in

which the "human" succeeds the "machinic." Once the verse commences, Wilson and Murdock's voices overlap (although Wilson dominates) until the lyrics make explicit references to informational technologies, such as "could it be your face I see on my computer screen" and "thanks to my technology," which are bolstered by the vocoder in the background, leading to a crescendo in which all three voices grow higher both in pitch and volume. The chorus consists mainly of the Troutman's vocoderized singing of: "Shoo-be-do-bop shoo-do-bop I wanna love you / shoo-be-do-bop computer love," reinforced by the "feminine" "sanging" of "I wanna love you baabeee."[50] The second verse follows the same trajectory as the first until the vocoder interrupts Wilson and Murdock to proclaim: "I want to keep you up tonight / you are such a sweet delight," which gives way to an additional female solo performance telling us that she "will cherish the memory of this night." After another chorus the song eschews "meaning" by simply repeating "computer love" or "digital love" for sonic effect rather than narrative closure; the feminine presence also evaporates from the sonic text. While the title indexes Kraftwerk's earlier cut of the same name, the two aural formulations' sonic similarity is scant. Although both share a slow tempo, Kraftwerk exploits its members' stereotypically Germanic voices to excavate the nonhuman and mechanical dimension of its "computer love," as opposed to Zapp, which wields both the vocoderized and human voices to unearth the "humanity" of machinic affections.[51] The Zapp track achieves this feat by drawing on the traditions of melismatic R&B singing and creating a three-way conversation, albeit an unequal one, between the male, female, and machinic utterances on the vocal track of the song. Overall, the lyrics of the tune fail to provide a clear picture of this computer love, which is so overbearing that it can only be expressed through the combined forces of female, male, and machinic voices. Although "a special girl" appears briefly in the words, mostly the repeated incantations of "computer love" are isolated, decoupled from merely serving as the conduit for anthropomorphic desire. If read/heard solely within the tradition of R&B love songs, "Computer Love" utilizes the vocoder to intensify the longing of the male subject, and even though this current is surely prominent here, the track also suggests desire for the machine itself by deferring a conclusive or coherent identification of its target. We might say by way of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that "Computer Love" sonically formulates the following dictum: "Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire another machine connected to it."[52]

Where Zapp employs the vocoder as a forceful and poignant "index of technological audibility," thematizing technology conspicuously in the

lyrics so that the vocoder bears an obvious mimetic relevance to the textual signification of the track, 702's "You Don't Know," emblematic of current vocoder use in R&B, fails to offer any definitive correlation between the vocoder and the textual content of the song.[53] The easy and techno-determinist explanation for this development lies in the large-scale shift from analog to digital technologies in musical (re)production during the fourteen years separating the two recordings. Such technologies enable producers to add "the vocoder effect" without the singers having to physically sing into a vocoder, transforming vocals into a portion of the many "zeroes and ones" that constitute the totality of a digitally produced sound recording.[54] "You Don't Know" comes from the female trio's eponymous 1999 album and encapsulates the sonic provenances of millennial R&B succinctly. Beginning with the obligatory "shout out" to the producers of the song, the Swedish duo Soulshock and Karlin, the mid-tempo cut deploys the cell phone effect throughout and melds musical syncopation with the rhythmic singing so popular in contemporary R&B. The vocoder effect weaves in and out of the sung verses, both in the main and background vocals, without any decisive connection to the signification of the lyrics. Some of the lyrics heard through the vocoder effect during the first half of the track include: "So why won't you tell me / Why you mean so much to me?"; "Now whata girl gotta do / To make you see"; "I want your love"; "Let me down, down (down)." A portion of these lines is repeated in different parts of the recording but not characterized by the vocoder effect, only adding to the indeterminate significance of this technique. During the final two minutes the vocoder effect rears its sonic head only once, supporting the central voice as it declares: "Just don't know." As a whole, the vocoder effect alters the function of the vocoder, even if the former shares a parasitical relationship with the latter, by dispersing the machinic across the musical text rather than giving it an integral and system-maintaining role. The vocoder effect deterritorializes the vocoder, becoming one production among many to process the "human" voice in contemporary black popular music. Ironically, the vocoder effect in black popular music amplifies the human provenances of the voice, highlighting its virtual embodiment, because it conjures a previous, and allegedly more innocent, period in popular music, bolstering the "soulfulness" of the human voice. Here, the "human" and "machinic" become mere electric effects that conjoin the human voice and (intelligent) machines.[55]

Surely desire serves as the central topos for all R&B, even if as in current formations it is desire for material objects rather than human subjects; nevertheless, it is always desire that has no "real" destiny. The vocoder and vocoder effect are literalizations of Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring-

machines" in that they excavate the productive and machinic provenances of desire not chained by lack found in all R&B.[56] This productive force has no object, because the performance of desire in R&B is always one-sided, invariably a rumination by the effect of a desiring subject (the R&B singer) and not the desired subject or object. In addition, R&B desire is always already a desire of the second order: the performance of desire rather than desire as such.[57] Instead, the R&B desiring machine "does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or that desire lacks a fixed subject" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 26). In the move from the vocoder to the vocoder effect, the centrality of the human voice dissipates throughout the desiring machine that is R&B. Moreover, other clearly technological treatments of the voice, such as the cell phone effect, the presence of producers in the musical texts, and thematization of informational technologies in the lyrics aggregate to form the R&B desiring machine. The vocoderized voice highlights the machinic dimension of the R&B desiring machine by synthesizing all the other parts into a "sound machine, which molecularizes and atomizes, ionizes sound matter" (*Thousand Plateaus*, 343). Deleuze and Guattari continue this trajectory by claiming that "the synthesizer makes audible the sound process itself, the production of that process, and puts it in contact with still other elements beyond sound matter" (*Thousand Plateaus*, 343). The presence of speech-synthesizing devices in R&B intensifies the technological mediation of the recorded voice per se ("the sound process itself"), since it dodges the naturalism associated with the human voice in so many other popular music genres. In circumventing this naturalism, R&B imagines interpersonal relations and informational technologies as mutually constitutive rather than antithetical foils.

The title of this essay, "Feenin," comes from a 1993 track by the R&B group Jodeci, who were among the forerunners of today's hip hop–inspired black pop. "Feenin" deploys a vocoder to transmit only the word *feenin* in its chorus; the rest of the track is sung in a traditional, "human" R&B singing style. The term *feenin* derives from *fiend*, as in drug fiend, and Jodeci uses it to signify all-encompassing desire. The lyrics suggest an unequivocal link between the desire for a human love object and the feenin of a junkie, in lines like the following: "All the chronic [marijuana] in the world couldn't even mess with you / You're the ultimate high"; "Girl it's worse than drugs / Cause I'm an addict of you"; "Surely girl, without a doubt / You know you got me strung out." Thus desire, in this scenario, refuses to signify any traditional humanist provenances, instead appearing in the guise of a self-generating addiction machine. Moreover, the shift from vocoder to vocoder effect is clearly audible on K-Ci and Jo Jo's 2001 single "Crazy" when compared with the

earlier recording of these two former members of Jodeci.[58] Where "Feenin" wields the vocoder to emphasize one particular aspect of the lyrics, "Crazy" weaves the vocoder effect in and out of the musical text throughout without any particular correlation between form and content, recapitulating the difference between Zapp's and 702's mechanized enunciations. Thus the term *feenin*, as it is sung by a black vocoderized voice, might be more apt vis-à-vis contemporary R&B than *desire*, since it pushes desire to the extreme. In this extreme the human subject stands in for either a mind-altering substance—locating desire for a love object in the realm of neurochemical reactions—or desire is yoked to nonhuman objects such as cars and designer clothes—moving desire from the realm of the ideal to the crassly material. This *feenin* dissolves the parameters of the coherent subject in such radical ways that human—all too human— desire can be represented only in the guise of the machinic, and the human is thus inextricably intertwined with various informational technologies. Taken together, these factors recast the R&B "desiring machine" as a "feenin machine," which explosively sounds the passage from *soul* to *hypersoul*.

The virtual embodied in contemporary R&B follows neither the orbit of those that usually populate the annals of cybertheory nor Eshun's Afrofuturist ruminations; instead, R&B desiring and feenin machines reticulate the human voice with intelligent machines without assuming that "information has lost its body" or that any version of black posthumanism must take on an alien form. Because, for reasons I have outlined above, black cultural practices do not have the illusion of disembodiment, they stage *the body* of information and technology as opposed to the lack thereof. Where Eshun zeroes in on the antihumanist cultures of Afrofuturism, Hayles discusses the history of cybernetics and informatics as well as classical science fiction and cyberpunk narratives. Eshun provides a singular account of nonhumanist black popular music as it explosively interfaces with sound technologies, but in doing so he fails to take in the ramifications of these discourses in genres that do not explicitly announce themselves as Afrofuturist, such as R&B. Hayles's conclusions seem indicative of numerous studies of virtuality and/or cyberspace, where race is heard in a minor key, and computer-mediated communication is the sole melody of the song we know all too well: the virtual. I hope I have shown that any theory of posthumanism would benefit from making race central to its trajectory, not ancillary, as well as venturing beyond purely visual notions of subjectivity. At the very least this would diversify the purview of this newly burgeoning line of inquiry while rendering this field more interesting and less myopic. We could do far worse than turn the critical dial on our radio to those lower frequencies, where the sounds of black popular music, in

This *feenin* dissolves the parameters of the coherent subject in such radical ways that human—all too human—desire can be represented only in the guise of the machinic.

the immortal vocoderized words of Zapp, are "still bubbalistic, realistic, supalistic / whatever is right for you / you can find it all on your radio."[59]

While both Hayles and Eshun seek to venture beyond the category of the human as personified by a white liberal humanist subject in order to advance versions of the posthuman, I think the historical and contemporary practices of the seemingly humanist strands of black popular music and their relation to informational technologies not only expand these two notions of the posthuman but are at the forefront of coarticulating the "human" with informational technologies. These segments of mainstream black popular music, particularly in regard to the status of recorded voices and the representations of soul and subjectivity they harbor, provide different circuits to and through the (post)human. Instead of dispensing with the humanist subject altogether, these musical formations reframe it to include the subjectivity of those who have had no simple access to its Western, post-Enlightenment formulation, suggesting subjectivities embodied and disembodied, human and posthuman. My final claim is modest, but I hope no less consequential: in proclaiming the historical moment of the posthuman, we might do well to interrogate "other humanities," and not just discard this category wholly, as Eshun does, or equate humanity with the white liberal subject, as in Hayles.[60] This way, we might actually begin to ameliorate the provinciality of "humanity" in its various Western guises as opposed to simply rehashing the same old stories ad infinitum.

Notes

1. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 291.

2. If anthologies geared toward undergraduate syllabi are any indication, then *The Cybercultures Reader* seems typical in the field of cybertheory, as only three of the forty-eight articles included address racial difference (David Bell and Barbara Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader* [New York: Routledge, 2000]).

3. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).

4. See Kalí Tal, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture," www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Whiteness.html; and "Duppies in the Machine, or, Anybody Know Where I Can Buy a Copy of the Upnorth-Outwest Geechee Jibara Quik Magic Trance Manual for Technologically Stressed Third World People?" www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Duppies.html; Joe Lockard, "Virtual Whiteness and Narrative Diversity," darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ucurrent/uc4/4-lockard.html. The fact that both Lockard's and Tal's important interventions have thus far been accessible only on-line and not in traditional academic anthologies or journals only magnifies their marginalization within cybertheory. See also the essays collected in Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Thomas Foster argues—somewhat haphazardly, I might add—that African American culture prefigures cybertheory, which suspends black culture in a pretechnological bubble instead of making it central to contemporary technoinformational ecologies (Thomas Foster, "The Souls of Cyber-Folk," in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 137–63).

5. Macpherson, as quoted in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

6. Furthermore, Hayles seems to endorse the Cartesianism she finds deplorable in cybernetics when she writes, in a sentence that reads like a paraphrase of Descartes's famous *cogito, ergo sum* formula, "people become posthuman because they think they are posthuman" (6).

7. While the designation "white boys" might sound flippant, I think it provides an apt description of the white techno-geek tradition Hayles draws on to construct her argument.

8. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 123.

9. Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present,* ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 203–23; Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

10. Hayles's critique and theory only "work" because she positions her own insights against the retrograde impulses of cybernetics and informatics as opposed to writing about more contemporary discourses that already incorporate notions of informational embodiment. In contrast, Donna Haraway's hugely influential "Cyborg Manifesto," far from renouncing embodiment, is almost singularly concerned with questions of technology as they connect with the corporeal. Moreover, Haraway also makes race central to her interpretive endeavor (Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* [New York: Routledge, 1991], 149–82).

11. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines, "Introduction: Hidden Circuits," in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, ed. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1–12; 5. This sentiment echoes Samuel Delany's dif-

ferentiation between "the white boxes of computer technology" and "the black boxes of modern street technology," in which the former appear as more technological than the latter. According to Delany this hierarchical division is often racially color-coded (Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994], 179–222; 192).

12. On catachresis, see Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 137, 161–62; and Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. Alan Bass, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–71.

13. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1991), 316.

14. Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles," *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (1989): 637–47 and "On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond," in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 432–69. Wynter characterizes her disciplinary strategy, situated at the interstices of the humanities and cognitive sciences, as "a science of the human, which takes as its objects of inquiry the correlation between our rhetorical-discursively instituted systems of meaning and the neurochemical signaling field that they orchestrate" ("Beyond the Word," 646).

15. At a different point in the article, Wynter explains the "selected" in the quote above: "the human as an evolutionarily selected natural organism now differed from other forms of organic life only by the fact that it created 'culture'" ("Beyond the Word," 640).

16. Wynter also lists the native, woman, worker, mad, and unfit as further ontological others; however, she insists that the designation "nigger" holds a particularly volatile position in the "Man as Man" configuration ("Beyond the Word," 642).

17. Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 18. Although I endorse Barrett's astute and useful differentiation between the *signing voice* and the *singing voice*, at times it runs the risk of configuring the black singing voice as always already embodied, rather than as a series of strategies and/or techniques of corporeality.

19. See Ronald Radano, "Denoting Difference: The Writing of Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (spring 1996): 506–44; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999);

20. The following discussion of Eshun draws on my review essay of his book (Alexander Weheliye, "Keepin' It (Un) Real: Perusing the Boundaries of Hip Hop Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 1 [fall 2001]: 287–306).

21. The listserv can be accessed at groups.yahoo.com/group/afrofuturism. The Web site's address is www.afrofuturism.net. Sheree Thomas's edited anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner, 2000) contains mostly fictional pieces but also includes some essays about black science fiction by such authors as Samuel Delany, Walter Mosley, and Octavia Butler. See also Diedrich Diedrichsen, ed., *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur* (Berlin: ID Verlag, 1998). One might also consult John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* (Icarus Films, 1995), which transacts the musical and literary provenances of Afrofuturism by way of both fictional narrative and documentary means.

22. Eshun himself recognizes that the opposition between Afrofuturism and black humanism is far from absolute, but he insists on constantly invoking the split as a heuristic device throughout the text: "At Century's End, the Futurhythmmachine has two opposing tendencies, two synthetic drives: the Soulful and the Postsoul. But then all music is made of both tendencies running simultaneously at all levels, so you can't merely oppose a humanist R&B with a posthuman Techno" (*More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 6).

23. This is a reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of "being with," in which singularities such as the "I" or the "event" always harbor multiplicities rather than standing on their own (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000]). Thanks to Kevin Bell for bringing the question of singularity to my attention.

24. Not only does Jerkins proclaim his musical "property," his voice also forms a crucial component in the call and response part later in the song. In general, numerous R&B songs are identified with the producers, not primarily the performers; and most high-profile R&B and hip hop producers also record and perform in their own right (Destiny's Child, "Say My Name," *The Writing's on the Wall* [Sony Music, 1999]). Jerkins makes his presence felt vocally on the tracks he has produced for Brandy, Toni Braxton, and Whitney Houston as well.

25. These aural signatures should be distinguished from "the sound" associated with particular producers since they do not unabashedly and unmistakably imprint the name and subjectivity of the producer. Rather, the producer's "sound" leaves room for the performer's vocal signature, which in these cases becomes secondary to the producer's aural presence.

26. Ginuwine, "Same Ol' G," *100% Ginuwine* (Blackground/Sony Music, 1999).

27. See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: The Aesthetics of Rock*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 53.

28. A recent issue of *Vibe* magazine, the most successful mainstream hip hop and R&B monthly, features a special section on producers. Craig Seymour introduces the section: "[m]aybe it dates back to Dr. Dre's smokin' The Chronic. Or perhaps it began when self-enamored Sean 'Puffy' Combs started giving himself shout-outs on the records he produced. . . . But whatever the catalyst, the effect is clear. Somewhere along the knotted and often intertwining time lines of hip hop and R&B, the producers of songs became as important—if not more so— than the artists they produced" (Craig Seymour, "The Producers," *Vibe* [May 2001], 123). I would locate the "origin" of this trend in modern R&B a little earlier, in Janet Jackson's work with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. The duo, which has worked with Jackson collaboratively on all her albums since 1986's *Control*, appeared in several of the videos for singles from that record, adding a visual presence to the already sonically inscribed one.

29. I am using "symbiosis" in the manner suggested by Keith Ansell Pearson, where hitherto separate life-forms and/or technologies contaminate each other to form a new, albeit unstable, entity that is integral to both biological and technological "development" rather than auxiliary (Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nieztsche and the Transhuman Condition* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 132–34).

30. The prime example of this development is SWV's very underrated final album, *Release Some Tension* (RCA/BMG, 1997), on which eight of the twelve

tracks sport either raps by producers (Sean "Puffy" Combs and Missy Elliott) or rappers (Redman and Lil' Kim).

31. Although I focus on the impact of hip hop on R&B, this relationship should not be construed as a one-way street, especially since hip hop's immense popularity would be unthinkable without the infusion of R&B. In the early nineties hip hop producers, especially those from the West Coast like Dr. Dre, started to incorporate melodies into their heretofore primarily rhythmically oriented tracks. Also, in much the same way that R&B records started featuring guest raps, hip hop cuts routinely employ R&B singers to sing choruses and hooks. Today, most hip hop hits, by Jay-Z, Lil' Kim, Nelly, and Ja Rule, for instance, would not be possible without sung rather than rapped choruses. Kelefa Sanneh, in an article about the "rebirth" of R&B, measures how this genre has been impacted and revitalized by hip hop but falls short of ascertaining the reciprocal consequences of this symbiosis (Kelefa Sanneh, "Responding to Rap, R&B Is Reborn," *New York Times*, 8 April 2001). Ja Rule's collaboration with Lil' Mo serves as a good example of this trend, where Rule's rapping/singing seamlessly blends into Lil' Mo's sung vocal parts, blurring any steadfast distinctions between rapping and singing (Ja Rule [featuring Lil' Mo and Vita], "Put It on Me," *Rule 3.36* [Murder Inc./Def Jam, 2000]).

32. This is not to argue that melody disappeared from the R&B landscape, or that rhythm did not form an indispensable component of earlier permutations of R&B, but that the emphasis shifted radically toward the rhythm (Mary J. Blige, *What's the 411* [Uptown/MCA, 1992] and *My Life* [Uptown/MCA, 1994]). Both Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill smoothly navigate back and forth between singing and rapping in their work.

33. The difference between the clipped angularity of rhythmic singing and the effusive, mellifluous intonation of traditional R&B can best be heard on Destiny's Child's "Say My Name," where the rhythmic verses stand in unequivocal contrast to the balladlike chorus. The main reason for this transmogrification, I would venture, is the increased amount of syncopation and other more adventurous rhythmic arrangements on contemporary R&B records, which summon the voice to take on a more mechanical character.

34. In his recent work, Paul Gilroy has addressed these shifts, bemoaning the disappearance of freedom as form of transcendence in R&B. In this way, Gilroy is not all that far from most critical writings about R&B that read more like nostalgic eulogies rather than intellectual engagements with current manifestations of the genre. See Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style': Interview with Paul Gilroy," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 250–65; Paul Gilroy, "Analogues of Mourning, Mourning the Analogue," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 261–71; and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Politics beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Other critics who lament the demise of soul in contemporary R&B, if they write about the current moment at all, include: Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988); Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (1984; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1994); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Although Michael Hanchard does not write about the sonic provenances of R&B,

he does take in the recent changes in the genre without the same value judgments as the other critics (Michael Hanchard, "Jody," in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 193–217). In general, the critical literature on R&B is rather scant, particularly when compared to such young genres as hip hop or electronic dance music.

35. Bat, "What Is Hypersoul?" www.hyperdub.com/softwar/hypersoul.cfm, 1.

36. I owe the cinema verité reference to Ira Livingston.

37. Missy Misdemeanor Elliot (featuring 702), "Beep Me 911," *Supa Dupa Fly* (Elektra, 1997).

38. Destiny's Child, "Bug-a-Boo," *The Writing's on the Wall* (Sony Music, 1999).

39. Blaque, "808" (Trackmasters/Columbia, 1999). The TR-808 is a drum machine produced by Roland. As Tricia Rose explains, "the Roland TR-808 is a rap drum machine of choice for its 'fat sonic boom,' because of the way it processes bass frequencies" (Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* [Hanover, N.H.: New England University Press, 1994], 75). Rose cites several hip hop producers, who describe "the boom" of the TR-808 as its capacity for detuning and thereby distorting the bass sounds to make them more intense.

40. Ginuwine and Aaliyah, "Final Warning," *100% Ginuwine*.

41. The Firm, "Phone Tap," *Nas Escobar, Foxy Brown, AZ, and Nature Present The Firm: The Album* (Aftermath/Interscope, 1997).

42. Destiny's Child, Joe, TLC, Aaliyah, Janet Jackson, 702, Jamelia, Kandi, Mya, Craig David, and Missy Elliot have all used this cell phone effect on recent recordings, as have teen pop acts N'Sync, Britney Spears, and the Backstreet Boys.

43. Scott Woods, "Will You Scrub Me Tomorrow," *Village Voice*, 13–19 December 2000 (villagevoice.com/issues/0050/woods.shtml). Woods focuses mainly on pop R&B artists; however, these technological tendencies can also be found in the more traditional strand of R&B, usually designated as "neoclassical soul," which summons the golden age of soul music. Maxwell, for instance, uses a voice distortion device on "Submerge," and at the end of D'Angelo's most recent album blips of all the preceding tracks are played backward so as to remind us that we are indeed listening to a technologically mediated recording (Maxwell, "Submerge," *Embrya* [Columbia/Sony Music, 1998] and D'Angelo, *Voodoo* [Virgin, 2000]).

44. Reynolds holds that R&B producers employ "anti-naturalistic studio techniques, . . . digitally processing vocals to make them sound even more mellifluous and diabetically ultra-sweet" (Simon Reynolds, "Feminine Pressure: 2-Step Garage [The Director's Cut, Plus Footnotes]," members.aol.com/blissout/2step.htm, 4). The main thrust of this article concerns the sonic permutations of the British genre known as 2-Step Garage or UK Garage, which often combines U.S.–style R&B and House with the speed and syncopation of Jungle. The vocally oriented spectrum of UK Garage pushes the uttered sensibilities of U.S. R&B to its provisional conclusion by dissecting sampled and/or sung vocal parts, radically recombining them in relation to the rhythm as opposed to the melody. Adopting a term by Bat, Reynolds calls this messing up of the vocals "vocal science" (3). For an introduction to this particular strand of UK Garage, hear Artful Dodger's mix CD *Rewind* (London/Sire, 2001).

45. This phrase comes from Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson. I have

changed the wording somewhat—they use "index of visibility"—but only in the spirit of their ideas concerning the interdependence of music and technology (Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 112).

46. Cher's ubiquitous "Believe" (Warner, 1998) and Madonna's "Music" (Maverick/Sire, 2000) have made extensive use of the vocoder effect. In Cher's case, much of the success of the biggest hit of her thirty-year career was attributed to the vocoder. Janet Jackson, Kandi, 3LW, Dream, and N'Sync, among others, have all produced tracks that utilize this effect. Some electronic musicians, such as IB or Console, use voice-generating software that emulates "human" speech instead of processing "human" voices and credit these on their CDs. IB, for instance, attributes the vocals to several of the tracks on his *Pop Artificielle* album (Shadow, 2000) to the *raw™* software.

47. The cover of Herbie Hancock's 1978 album *Sunlight* (CBS), includes a special note on his VSM 201 Sennheiser vocoder, explaining that "the voices you hear are entirely synthesized." Kraftwerk's many uses of the vocoder can be heard on the greatest-hits CD *The Mix* (Elektra/Warner Brothers, 1991). For a general overview of electro classics, consult the compilations *Street Jams: Electric Funk*, parts 1 and 2 (Rhino, 1992). As an idea, synthesizing human voices can be traced back as far as the late eighteenth century, when Austrian phonetician Wolfgang von Kempelen constructed a device that mechanically approximated the human vocal apparatus. See James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 16–60; and "Wolfgang von Kempelen's and Subsequent Speaking Machines," www.ling.su.se/staff/hartmut/kemplne.htm. Twentieth-century speech synthesis took a big leap in 1939 when Homer Dudley, a research physicist at Bell Laboratories, developed two devices—Voder and Vocoder—that analyzed and synthesized human speech by electronic means. Later, these contraptions were further developed and linked to computer technology; however, it was not until the late sixties and seventies that they found their way into the musical productions of experimental artists such as Wendy Carlos and popular musicians like Kraftwerk. See "Homer Dudley's Speech Synthesizer," www.obsolete.com/120_years/machines/vocoder; "Multimedia Communications Research Laboratory,"www.bell-labs.com/org/1133/Heritage/Synthesis; "Vocoder," www.Riteh.hr/~markb/who/jmbg/vocoders/vocoder.htm.

48. Commencing with EPMD's first hit, "You Got's to Chill," in 1986 this development continued through most of the duo's recorded output, wherein most albums contain one or more tracks that obviously sample Zapp.

49. Zapp, "Computer Love," *The New Zapp IV U* (Warner Brothers, 1985) and Zapp and Roger, "I Want to Be Your Man," *Zapp and Roger: All the Greatest Hits* (1988; Reprise, 1993). Tricia Rose briefly glosses the difference between Zapp's vocoder use on these two ballads and its deployment by producer Dr. Dre on the Tupac track "California Love," which featured Roger Troutman's vocoderized presence. About "I Want to Be Your Man," she writes: "Troutman is using the vocoder on top of what some might consider to be pre-high-tech narratives of 'whole' 'unmediated' human relationships." Conversely, Dr. Dre uses "the vocoder (and sampling equipment more generally) to narrate mediated and fractured relationships" (Tricia Rose, "Sound Effects: Tricia Rose Interviews Beth Coleman," in Nelson, Tu, and Hines, *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, 142–53; 147).

50. "Sanging," as opposed to just singing, emphasizes the highly performative and "emotional" vocal styles of black musical genres such as gospel or soul that underscore the physicality of "human" voice production. The distinction is crucial here, because the affective labor is carried out by the female voice in one of the only instances where Murdock's vocal apparatus does not merely serve to prop up the masculine and machinic voices but sounds by itself. This affective excess of the black female voice can also be heard in a crucial moment of "I Want to Be Your Man," the other well-known Zapp vocoder ballad, where the male voice sings: "Words can never say how I feel." This crisis in linguistic meaning making is followed by a vocoderized "it's too intense," heightening the way in which desire disrupts the flow of language. Finally, we hear the female voice, in her only solo performance on this track, cooing, "oohooo ohooo oooooh," in effect eschewing linguistic meaning altogether. The female voice represents the nonlingual sonorousness needed to carry out the affective labor, which neither the male nor machinic voices can. Thus the female voice becomes the channel for the sonic representation of unmitigated desire.

51. Kraftwerk, "Computer Love," *The Mix* (Elektra/Warner Brothers, 1991).

52. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 26.

53. 702, "You Don't Know," *702* (Motown, 1999).

54. The vocoder effect, in contradistinction to the vocoder as a material entity, is indicative of the wider popular music landscape where most recordings apply this effect in similar ways.

55. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Here is how Deleuze and Guattari imagine sonic deterritorialization: "It seems that when sound deterritorializes, it becomes more and more refined; it becomes more specialized and autonomous. . . . When sound deterritorializes, it tends to dissolve, to let itself be steered by other components" (347).

56. This is a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Freudian conception of desire that is not framed by a primary lack in the subject but functions as a productive force that brings the subject into being and fuels the social machine (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1–50).

57. Here I am not suggesting that desire can ever be formulated without being mediated by a host of material and discursive forces but that this particular machination of desire incorporates its own performativity.

58. K-Ci and Jo Jo, "Crazy" (MCA, 2001).

59. Zapp, "Radio People," *The New Zapp IV U.*

60. I am borrowing the phrase "other humanities" from the title of Lisa Lowe's talk delivered at the Humanities Institute, State University of New York, Stony Brook, March 2000.

Race, Sex, and Nerds

FROM BLACK GEEKS TO ASIAN AMERICAN HIPSTERS

Ron Eglash

The development of technological expertise requires not only financial resources but also cultural capital. Nerd identity has been a critical gateway to this technocultural access, mediating personal identities in ways that both maintain normative boundaries of power and offer sites for intervention.[1] This essay examines the figure of the nerd in relation to race and gender identity and explores the ways in which attempts to circumvent its normative gatekeeping function can both succeed and fail.

Nerd Identity As a Gatekeeper in Science and Technology Participation

Turkle (1984) vividly describes nerd self-identity in her ethnographic study of undergraduate men at MIT. In one social event "they flaunt their pimples, their pasty complexions, their knobby knees, their thin, underdeveloped bodies" (196); in interviews they describe themselves as losers and loners who have given up bodily pleasure in general and sexual relations in particular. But Turkle notes that this physical self-loathing is compensated for by technological mastery; hackers, for example, see themselves as "holders of an esoteric knowledge, defenders of the purity of computation seen not as a means to an end but as an artist's material whose internal aesthetic must be protected" (207).

While MIT computer science students might be an extreme case, other researchers have noted similar phenomena throughout science and technology subcultures. Noble (1992) suggests that contemporary cultures of science still bear a strong influence from the clerical aesthetic culture of the Middle Ages Latin Church, which rejected both women and bodily or sensual pleasures. He points out that the modern view of science as an opposite of religion is quite recent, and that even in the midst of twentieth-century atheist narratives, science (and "applied" technological pursuits such as creating artificial life or minds) continues to carry transcendent undertones. Noble's historical argument easily combines with Turkle's social psychology of nerd self-image.

Normative gender associations are not the only restrictions that nerd identity places on technoscience access. In an essay whose title contains

the provocative phrase "Could Bill Gates Have Succeeded If He Were Black," Amsden and Clark (1995) note that the lack of software entrepreneurship among African Americans cannot simply be attributed to lack of education or start-up funds, since both are surprisingly low requirements in the software industry. Rather, much of the ability of white software entrepreneurs appears to derive from their opportunities to form collaborations through a sort of nerd network—either teaming with fellow geeks (Bill Gates and Paul Allen at Microsoft) or pairing up between "suits and hackers" (Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak at Apple).

But if nerd identity is truly the gatekeeper for technoscience as an elite and exclusionary practice, it is doing a very inadequate job of it. First, while significant gaps are still present, there has been a dramatic increase in science and technology scholastic performance and career participation by women and underrepresented minorities since the 1960s (Campbell, Hombo, and Mazzeo 1999); yet during that time period nerd identity has become a more and not less prominent feature of the social landscape. Second, this change has been far stronger in closing the gender gap than in closing the race gap. For example, in the 1990s the gender gap in scholastic science performance for seventeen-year-olds was significantly lower, while the gap between black and white seventeen-year-olds remained the same. Yet Noble and Turkle portray gender/sexuality, not race, as the overriding feature of nerd identity (Turkle does not, for example, offer any reflections about the possibility of racial identity in her comments about "pasty complexions"). Finally, we might note that in comparison to, say, Hitler's Aryan *Übermensch*, the geek image is hardly a portrait of white male superiority.

Indeed, the more we examine it, the more nerd identity seems less a threatening gatekeeper than a potential paradox that might allow greater amounts of gender and race diversity into the potent locations of technoscience, if only we could better understand it. Of course, to the extent that geekdom fails to create such barriers—to the extent that it allows women and underrepresented minorities to fully participate in technoscience without being nerds—one can simply ignore it. But what happens when we fuse the ostensibly white male subculture of nerds with its race and sex opposites? To what extent might nerd identity become one of the *fracta* that can help open the gates?[3]

The Nerd in Historical Perspective

A good history of the American nerd has yet to be written, but its starting point might be in the radio amateurs of the early twentieth century, start-

Ron Eglash

ing with teenage "wireless clubs" in the 1920s.[4] In an interview with Mark Dery (1994, 192) science fiction (SF) writer Samuel Delaney notes this connection: "The period from the twenties through the sixties that supplies most of those SF images was a time when there was always a bright sixteen- or seventeen-year old around who could fix your broken radio. . . . He'd been building his own crystal radios and winding his own coils since he was nine. . . . And, yes, he was about eighty-five percent white."

These (predominantly) young white males were, however, distinctly lower in class status than the figure of the intellectual or "egghead" of the same period. A good illustration of the distinction can be seen in the historical drama *Quiz Show*. In this film about a television game show in the 1950s, upper-class WASP Charles Van Doren beats geeky, working-class Jew Herbie Stempel, to the great relief of the quiz show staff: "At least now we got ourselves a real egghead, and not a freak." The implication is that Stempel's nerd challenge threatens both race and class boundaries for intellectual status.

After World War II the broad category of "electronic hobbyist" fused ham radio operators with dimestore science fiction, model trains, stereophonic sound, and mail-order kits. The Cold War era emphasis on science education (as well as veterans' education funding) drove these hobbyists and their more scholarly counterparts closer together. While the wholesome image of a Boy Scout merit badge in chemistry underscores the normative side of these postwar nerds, there was always the danger of their attachments to categories of the artificial or unnatural. In the 1955 film *Rebel without a Cause*, Sal Mineo's character, John Crawford, gives us one of the first screen appearances of the nerd. Nicknamed "Plato" for his bookish habits, he rides a scooter rather than a motorcycle and is seen at one point primping his hair before a photo of screen star Alan Ladd. A loner who lacks the tough demeanor exhibited by his male classmates, he appears to have a crush on the film's protagonist, James Dean. Plato's implied homosexuality is a warning for future generations of would-be geeks. Nerd identity will come at a price, threatening the masculinity of its male participants.

In the cultural logic of late-twentieth-century America, masculinity bears a particular relation to technology. Being a "real man" is to claim one's physiology in muscle and testosterone; male-associated technologies tend to involve physical labor (lawnmowers and power drills), subduing nature through force (trucks and tractors), and physical violence (tanks and guns). More masculine technologies tend to be seen as concrete, massive, and having direct physical effects. The more abstract artifice of science does not seem nearly so testosterone-drenched; it is easy to see how the artificial spaces of mathematics and computing can be framed

Thus exists the

racist stereotype

of Africans as

oversexual and

Asians as under-

sexual, with

"whiteness"

portrayed as the

perfect balance

between these

two extremes.

Given these

associations, it is

no coincidence

that many

Americans have

a stereotype of

Asians as nerds

and of African

Americans as

anti-nerd hipsters.

in opposition to manly identity. Thus the opposition between the more abstract technologies and normative masculinity keep nerd identity in its niche of diminished sexual presence.[5] How does this normative gender dichotomy compare to similar contrasts in racial identity?

In his analysis on the history of race in biology, Gould (1996, 401–12) notes that although the racial categories proposed by Linnaeus in 1758 were based only on geographic distinctions, in 1776 German naturalist J. F. Blumenbach extended the Linnaean categories to form an evolutionary framework: two lines of "degeneration" from an original "Caucasian" (a term he coined for the supposed origin near Mt. Caucasus) to Asians and Africans. Ironically, Blumenbach was motivated by his conviction in the unity of human beings—he opposed the claim for separate origins of humans on different continents—but that did not stop succeeding generations of racist scholars from using his work for their claims of an evolutionary hierarchy (and thus a hierarchy of genetically determined intelligence). Blumenbach's categories were quickly collapsed into a single ladder of evolutionary "advancement," with Africans at the bottom, Asians in the middle, and whites on top. In the postmodern era we have seen a return to Blumenbach's dichotomy; the best publicized have been *The Bell Curve* by Murray and Herrnstein and the pseudoscience of Phillip Rushton (1995). Much like Emily Martin's analysis of flexibility in postmodern representations of the immune system, these examples of postmodern racism are also marked by a flexible designation of particular characteristics: orientalism and primitivism.

Primitivist racism operates by making a group of people too concrete and thus "closer to nature"—not really a culture at all but rather beings of uncontrolled emotion and direct bodily sensation, rooted in the soil of sensuality. Orientalist racism operates by making a group of people too abstract and thus "arabesque"—not really a natural human but one who is devoid of emotion, caring only for money or an inscrutable spiritual transcendence.[6] Thus exists the racist stereotype of Africans as oversexual and Asians as undersexual, with "whiteness" portrayed as the perfect balance between these two extremes. Given these associations, it is no coincidence that many Americans have a stereotype of Asians as nerds and of African Americans as anti-nerd hipsters. Pop musician Brian Eno, for example, starkly states this race/geek alignment in a *Wired* magazine interview: "Do you know what a nerd is? A nerd is a human being without enough Africa in him" (Kelly 1995, 149). But what does it mean to use nerd identity as the grounds for contesting these links between race, sex, and technology? The following four examples of black nerds illuminate some of the possibilities for dislocating (or at least broadening) these narrow normative roles in the ecology of race and technoculture.
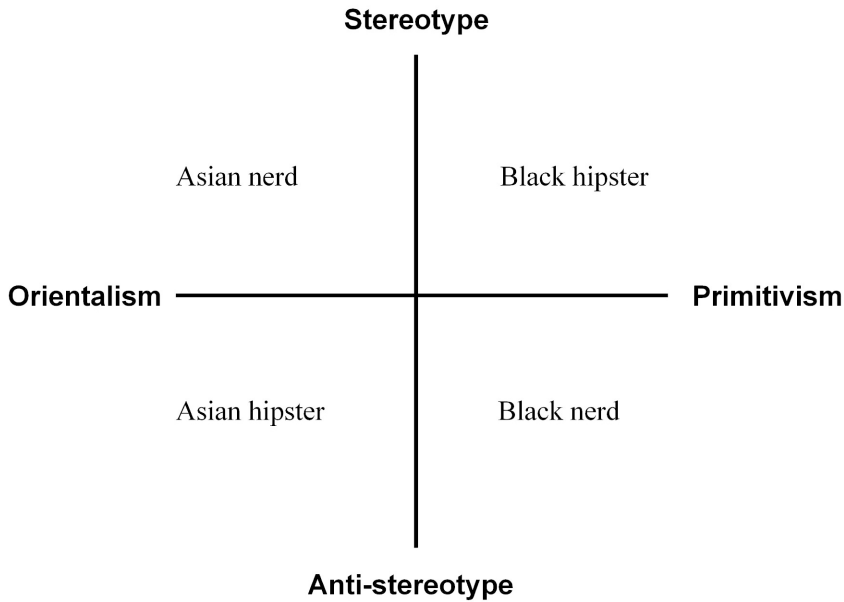
Ron Eglash

Stereotype

Asian nerd   Black hipster

Orientalism ———————————————————— Primitivism

Asian hipster   Black nerd

Anti-stereotype

Figure 1: Racism and Reversal

African American Exemplars

Let's begin with the personal style invoked by Malcolm X. At first nothing seems more incongruous than associating a founding father of black nationalism with pimple-faced computer geeks. But Malcolm's horned-rimmed glasses and insistent intellectualism recall the earlier figure of the egghead—not quite a nerd, but only because he needed to challenge the class restrictions as much as the mental stereotypes (in other words, challenging Herbie Stempel would not be nearly as powerful as taking on Charles Van Doren). In the section of his autobiography covering his dramatic self-education in prison, Malcolm repeatedly attributes all credit to Allah, his messenger Elijah Muhammad, and his struggle for black identity. Yet the most overtly eggheaded example in his autobiography is his passion for the debate over the identity of Shakespeare: "No color involved here; I just got intrigued over the Shakespearean dilemma" (1992, 213).

While the Shakespeare example proves Malcolm's cultural intellectualism, his persistent references to mathematics provide a kind of underlying nerd power: "I've often reflected upon such black veteran numbers men as West Indian Archie. If they had lived in another kind of society, their exceptional mathematical talents might have been better used"

Figure 2: Jaleel White playing Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*. Warner Bros.

(135). "When [Jackie Robinson] played . . . no game ended without my refiguring his average up through his last turn at bat" (179). "Allah taught me mathematics" (quoting Elijah Muhammad, 237). "[The University of Islam] had adult classes which taught, among other things, mathematics" (240). And in a television interview, his explanation for the new surname: "X stands for the unknown, as in mathematics." By invoking the abstract rationality of math, Malcolm stood in shocking contrast to primitivist expectations of white America.

Taking Malcolm's oppositional equation to a logical extreme, in January 1996 African American computer wiz Anita Brown launched the Web site Black Geeks Online.[7] Dedicated to "bridging the widening gap between technology haves and have-nots," she explains the aims of this community service organization in the following introductory passage:

> Why? Our experience indicates that from South Central to South Jersey computing is a hard sell in "the 'hood." Unlike baggy pants, hip-hop music and drugs, Information Technology (IT) is rarely marketed to African Americans. Black "geeks" rarely appear in media ads; there are few (if any) hardware and software ads in *Emerge, Essence, Vibe, The Source, Black Enterprise*; and the "nerd" and "geek"

images associated with computer professionals are still considered "uncool."

Brown's "uncool" assertion is certainly supported by what is probably the best-known public figure of the black nerd, Jaleel White's Steve Urkel from the television sitcom *Family Matters* (figure 2).[8] Urkel was originally written into the show merely as a guest for one episode, but he quickly became the most popular character in the show. The winning combination of Urkel's uncool persona and black racial identity was partly due to White's own comedic genius, but his appeal also derives from a combination of popular American fascinations: on the one hand, opposing the myth of biological determinism, on the other, continuing the myth of Horatio Alger, who in this case must pull himself up not the financial ladder but the social status rungs of youth subculture.

While Urkle's geek persona is a signature, other technology-associated black television figures remain less nerd-identified. Consider, for example, the black characters on various iterations of the *Star Trek* series, such as communications officer Lieutenant Uhura (of the original series), chief engineer Geordi La Forge, chief of security Lieutenant Worf, and Whoopi Goldberg's Guinan (on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), Captain Benjamin Sisko (of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), Vulcan security officer Officer Tuvok (of *Star Trek: Voyager*), and Travis Mayweather (of *Star Trek: Enterprise*). Out of a total of seven, only two—LeVar Burton's Geordi LaForge and Tim Russ's Tuvok—really qualify as nerds, and neither of them compares with the extraordinary geekiness of the teenaged Wesley Crusher from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.[9] Such limitations for black nerds can be illuminated through a comparison of the first series' Vulcan, Mr. Spock, with *Voyager*'s black Vulcan, Tuvok. Leonard Nimoy's Jewish identity readily orientalized Spock,[10] and as a result, Tuvok comes off as a kind of alien Tiger Woods: less nerdish than Spock since he is a security officer rather than a science officer (thus implying that black Vulcans are more physical or athletic). Even in outer space futures and alien landscapes, white access to technocultural identity remains supreme.

The career of African American actor Samuel L. Jackson also illuminates the figure of the black nerd in popular media. During the 1980s Jackson played a series of drug dealers and junkies,[11] but his increasing popularity allowed him greater control over his roles. As a result, he quickly switched to playing black nerds, including a computer hacker in *Jurassic Park*, a Pulitzer Prize–winning writer in *Amos and Andrew*, and a mathematical prodigy in *Sphere*. His role in *Sphere* is particularly illuminating in light of work by ethnographers of scientific culture such as Sharon Traweek.

Figure 3: Original design for Mace Windu, using the face of Industrial Light and Magic modeler Steve Alpin. © Lucasfilm Ltd. & ™ All Rights Reserved. Original Art by Iain McCaig
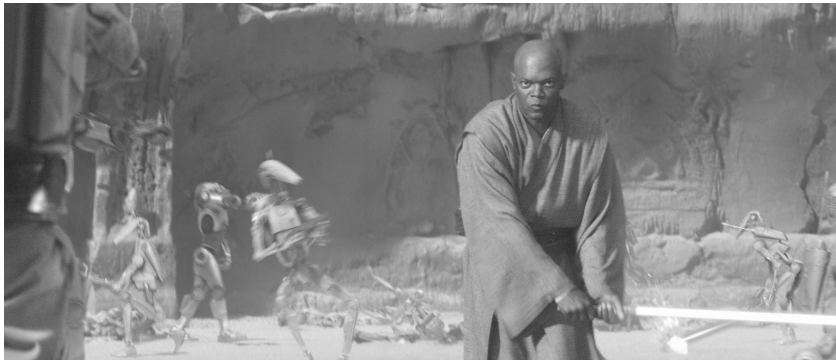
Figure 4: Samuel Jackson as Mace Windu in *Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. Digital work by ILM. © 2002 Lucasfilm Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Used under authorization.

Traweek (1982) describes an event in which a graduate student of physics repeatedly stuffed bread into his mouth at a restaurant. Rather than discouraging these poor manners, his professors were delighted, calling the waiter to bring more bread. This and similar scenarios brought Traweek to the realization that the ability to "ignore the social" (and thus express one's dedication to the asocial, universal realm of physics) is considered to be a sign of a good physicist.

Similarly, Jackson's mathematics nerd in *Sphere* is so socially unaware that he unwittingly causes the vessel to run aground (while he is immersed in his favorite science fiction, Jules Verne's *2000 Leagues under the Sea*) with blissful ignorance. Jackson's own real-life dedication to the sci-fi genre is not trivial: after confessing his geek love for the *Star Wars* films to producer George Lucas, he achieved the ultimate nerd fantasy of playing a Jedi knight—Mace Windu—a role that originally called for a white actor (figures 3 and 4).

Promises and Problems in Strategies of Reversal

What can we conclude about the oppositional possibilities for the figure of the black nerd? Even if it was only in the world of fantasy, Jackson's agency in changing the racial composition of the Council of Jedi Knights was a hard-won victory. As Anita Brown of Black Geeks Online maintains, the contradiction between the cool of African American identity and the uncool of nerds is no coincidence; it is precisely this racialized intersection of technology and personal identity that functions as a selective gateway to technosocial power. There are, of course, limits to this strategy of technocultural identity reversal. We might, for example, focus

on the ways in which hegemonic whiteness allows itself to be defined as an unmarked signifier and thus can affirm its own identity through asocial or antisocial behavior, while blackness depends on an explicitly social identity (for example, if Traweek's geek grad student had followed proper decorum, or if Jackson's mathematician in *Sphere* had been obsessively reading Malcolm X, neither would properly perform as nerds). But such limits are best understood not as specific to African Americans but as a general problem in resistance to hegemonic norms. In order to understand the more general problematic, let's see how such reversals operate for other racial groups, such as Asian Americans, and other social categories, such as gender.

The compulsory cool of black culture is mirrored by a compulsory nerdiness for orientalized others such as Middle Eastern groups, groups from India, and Asian Americans. Just as the black nerd fuses the desexualized geek with a racial identity stereotyped as hypersexual, Asian American hip hop allows racial groups stereotyped as desexualized nerds to fuse with the hypersexual funk of rap music. Oliver Wang's superb analysis of Asian American hip hop (1999) points to the oppositional power of these Korean American Seoul Brothers and Chinese American homies; he notes that their work helps to expose some of the realities of struggling Asian immigrants in America. But Wang's analysis runs the danger of turning Asian American hip hop into a narrative of sameness; his argument could be read as saying that Asian American youth and black youth perform hip hop because both encounter similar challenges. Drawing such a conclusion would miss some of the ways that the local contexts of these two varieties of hip hop work in opposite directions. While African American hip hop affirms a kind of unapologetically stereotyped identity (which, as Rose [1994] points out, works as a mode of resistance when the refusal to apologize for "keepin' it real" is linked to demands for broader structural change), Asian American hip hop seeks to challenge comparable stereotypes of Asian American identity. Asian American hip hop is useful not because it embraces previously disparaged attributes, but because it questions what were previously the cherished attributes of America's "model minority"—not affirming negritude, but negating nerditude.

Similarly, female exclusion from the male domain of technology is mediated by the opposition between nerd sexual formations, which focus desire into male antisocial forms, and female youth gender formations, which emphasize strong sociality. Wakeford (1997) makes this point in her analysis of gender in Web site constructions. Focusing on sites such as GeekGirls and NerdGrrrls, Wakeford critiques the easy assumption that sexism is rampant throughout the Web yet makes clear the motivations for

creating these hybrid technogender identities. She suggests that "the words themselves are codes to explicitly subvert the easy appropriation of women, and to resist stereotypes" (60). These stereotypes are both external—mainstream sexist portraits of women as unable or unwilling to engage with computer technology at the level of personal identity—and internal—stereotypes from what GeekGirl creator RosieX calls "an older style feminist rhetoric which tended to homogenize all women" (60). Similarly, the triple "r" in NerdGrrrls signifies an alliance to the punk-feminist bands (such as Riot Grrrls) that produce a break with humanist or romantic strands of feminism while calling for new forms of gender identity and affinity. Just as Black Geeks Online was battling against both external racism and the internal affirmation of essentialist concepts (essentialism that forced an opposition between black identity and technological prowess), these grrrl geeks vow dual oppositional use of their technocultural identity.

The problem with this line of resistance is that, in the words of Donna Haraway, it is never enough to "simply reverse the semiotic values."[12] Despite their identity violations, these figures of technological and cultural hybridity often reproduce the very boundaries they attempt to overcome: not surprising since they are focused on attaching the "wrong" race to the "right" identity. While the figure of the black nerd contradicts the normative opposition between African American identity and technology, it does so only by affirming the uncool attributes of technological expertise. The consequences can be tragic for the many African American students and teachers whose interest and identification with science and technology lead to accusations that they are "acting white." This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "peer proofing" by education researchers (Fordham 1991). But the public reaction to such reports is often problematic, implying that the need for change is purely internal to the black community,[13] rather than seeing a need to challenge the ways in which nerd identity itself is constituted or to loosen the geek grip on technoscience access.

The Afrofuturist Alternative

It is for this reason that we see the turn to Afrofuturism. Rather than merely reverse the stereotypes, the Afrofuturists have attempted to forge a new identity that puts black cultural origins in categories of the artificial as much as in those of the natural. Afrofuturists blur the distinctions between the alien mothership and Mother Africa, the middle passage of the black Atlantic and the musical passages of the black electronic, the mojo hand and the mouse. Categories like "black nerd" lean too heavily on the crutch of universalism; they assume that nerd identity is only racially aligned by

Afrofuturists blur the distinctions between the alien mothership and Mother Africa, the middle passage of the black Atlantic and the musical passages of the black electronic, the mojo hand and the mouse.

a kind of shallow, arbitrary association and is otherwise universally avail-able. Afrofuturism, in contrast, challenges both the implicit whiteness of nerds and the explicit technological absence of both realist and romantic black essentialisms.

That is not to say there is an absence of oppositional power in the reversal strategies; those who pioneered categories like "black nerd" or "Geek Girl"—Anita Brown, RosieX, the Seoul Brothers, and their fellow travelers—are my heroes. Nor should we have utopian illusions about Afrofuturism; it is fraught with problems stemming from its derivative relations to the original futurist movement, the elitism of academic influence, and, most problematically, its preference for artistic and literary approaches over science and technology, economics, politics, and other disciplines. But its ability to disrupt and redefine the boundaries of technocultural identity—the putative opposition between blackness and technology—rather than merely relocate the figures that inhabit them is important and controversial. Take, for example, the following discussion from the AfroFuturist listserv concerning DJ Spooky:

> I've heard more about who Spooky is than people playing his music. . . . I never hear about how great the music is . . . just that he's a nice guy. . . . Spooky has always seemed to me to be an over-intellectual nerd draped in hip drag . . . sort of like the "Junior" ("My Mama Used To Say") of electronica without the preppy clothes. . . . I'll be through to see if somethin' new is goin' down with Spooky next week on 18 January at Joe's Pub . . . maybe the cat'll put a foot in my grill with his power. . . . I hope so.

Even in the context of Afrofuturism, the figure of the nerd continues to haunt us.

Conclusion

Primitivist racism and orientalist racism maintain their power through mutually reinforcing constructions of masculinity, femininity, and technological prowess; yet mere reversal is never sufficient as an oppositional strategy. *Nerd* is still used in the pejorative sense; its routes to science and technology access are still guarded by the unmarked signifiers of whiteness and male gender. Groups such as the Afrofuturists seek alternative routes to circumvent the technocultural gateways of the geek. Black nerds, Asian hipsters, and geek grrrls both succeed and fail in challenging these boundaries, showing the limits of social transgression and the promise of reconfigured technocultural identity.

Notes

Figure 1 is by the author.

1. A discussion on the origin of *nerd* ran on the Humanist listserv in May 1990. Although the Oxford English Dictionary cites *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss (1950) as the earliest written occurrence ("And then, just to show them, I'll sail to Ka-Troo and Bring Back an It-Kutch, a Preep and a Proo, a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too!"), the earliest use in its contemporary sense was cited from student-produced burlesque at Swarthmore College in 1960. The term was not in common usage until the 1970s, when it became a stock phrase on the television show *Happy Days*.

I will be using the terms *geek* and *nerd* interchangeably here only for the sake of reducing repetition. The amount of writing devoted to making this distinction is surprising (see Katz 1997). Coupland's 1996 *Microserfs* offers several comparisons; perhaps the most illuminating is that "a geek is a nerd who knows that he is one."

3. Derrida 1978 (278) introduces the concept of rupture or disruption as an unacknowledged contradiction in what appear to be seamless structures of modernity. Lyotard 1984 (60), referring to these as "fracta" (from Mandelbrot's fractal geometry) more explicitly links such epistemological fissures to beneficial social change and recommends their study through an interdisciplinary "paraology." While Lyotard's account comes dangerously close to implying that fracta *automatically* lead to a more democracatic society, I would agree with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) assessment that such "dispersions" or "unfixity" only represent opportunities, not guarantees, toward the praxis of radical democratic politics (in the case of this essay, toward a more democratic technoscience).

4. Bass 1985, for example, notes the obsession with home-brewed radio among two generations of physics students, and Stone 1995 cites the crystal radio as an epiphany in geek self-construction. The popular electronics company Radio Shack still bears this legacy. Smith and Clancey 1998 provides several essays on these "hobbyist worlds."

5. This association is illuminated by the tension it creates in the face of the rising economic value of information technologies; how can corporations mass-market products that are culturally associated with wimps and geeks? The film industry's answer is often to adopt an elaborate apparatus that replaces the keyboard and mouse with impressive physical agility carried out in a virtual reality interface: Michael Douglas in *Disclosure*, Keanu Reeves in *Johnny Mnemonic*, and Matt Frewer in *Lawnmower Man*. Another strategy is providing contexts that try to link information technology with sexual undercurrents; thus the recent spate of television commercials in which potential lovers are in a physically proximate space (a loud rock concert, a sudden cloudburst) but have relations mediated by a gadget they just bought. See Cockburn and Ormrod 1993 for more general discussion.

6. The foundational use of *orientalism* comes from Said (1979), but his definition is more concerned with a Western dichotomy of self/other than the contrast to primitivism used here. For other such contrasting examples, see Gilman 1999 on the orientalist/primitivist contrasts in conceptions of the body and Campbell 2000, 60 on differences in the "primitivizing" and "orientalizing" rhetoric of various narcotics discourse (for example, marijuana versus opium). See Chinn 2000 for a more general discussion in relation to technology.

7. Brown's many achievements range from fashion entrepreneurship to national Web awards. See www.blackgeeks.net for more information.

8. The show ran from 1989 to 1998. A top-ratings performer as part of ABC's Friday family night, the series moved to CBS in its last season.

9. Admittedly, Wil Wheaton's character would be hard to beat; in a recent interview the actor himself admitted: "I consider myself to be really nerdy. I like things that are traditionally nerdy, like role playing games. . . . I consider myself a geeky person and I revel in it. Geek pride and all those things" (see www.aint-it-cool-news.com/display.cgi?id=6627). But the racial roles for *Star Trek* characters have been disappointingly limited; consider, for example, the ways in which Uhura's duties were suspiciously close to those of a secretary. See Bernardi 1998 for a detailed survey.

10. For example, the Vulcan four-fingered "live long and prosper" salute was an impromptu adoption from Nimoy's childhood experience watching the *kohanim* give the hand gesture for *Shin* (first letter of *Shaddai*) at synagogue services.

11. For example, he played "Gang Member No. 2" in *Ragtime* (1981), "Hold-Up Man" in *Coming to America* (1988), and a crack addict in *Jungle Fever* (1991). Jackson recently commented: "We've been given a lot of stock roles over the years. The pimp is one of them, the drug addict another. Criminals, bank robbers, rapists. . . . When you get those roles, people will ask, 'Why did you take a role like that?' Well, number one, I needed the job" (see www.moviemaker.com/issues/21/jackson/21_jackson.htm).

12. This quotation (Haraway 1989, 162) refers to a postcard that reversed the King Kong/Fay Wray relationship: it shows a gigantic blonde woman reaching in through a skyscraper and snatching a terrified gorilla from its bed. Haraway remarks that such reversal always fails; later in her text she notes the same failure for feminist evolutionary theories that attempt to establish a primeval matriarchy in human origins. Her broader point is that hegemony is too much a world-making enterprise to be undone by a simple act of reversal; such acts can become part of, but never fully constitute, the path toward more just and sustainable futures.

13. Similarly, the Asian American community gets blamed for generating the need for stereotype contradictions. A *Time* magazine article titled "Kicking the Nerd Syndrome" concludes: "The fact that the best and brightest among Asian Americans are veering away from programmed patterns of success may be, in fact, another sign that the over-achievers are settling into the mainstream" (Allis 1991, 66).

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"That Just Kills Me"

BLACK MILITANT NEAR-FUTURE FICTION

Kalí Tal

> [I] had begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery. Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality, I thought. All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting. It was funny, really. If I could just get the handle to the joke. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.
> —Chester Himes, My Life of Absurdity

In 1977, when I was a sixteen-year-old high-school dropout, I had the good fortune to be admitted to a graduate course in science fiction writing taught by Theodore Sturgeon at Antioch College West, in Hollywood, California. For our third or fourth assignment, Ted gave us instructions to write a science fiction story that explained "why black people don't write science fiction." That seemed like a good question to me, and I gave it as much thought as a precocious white sixteen-year-old could. (I am not sure how long Ted had been asking his classes this question, but I do know that ours was not the first to hear it.) In my own story, I gave my readers a sociological explanation: black people were too busy surviving in the here and now to write science fiction. All my classmates adopted sociological or social psychological explanations in their stories as well. These variations on a theme apparently made good sense to Ted, and I do not recall any other explanations being offered.

Over the last quarter of a century I've grown to understand that Ted asked the wrong question, and we students (all of us white) came up with the wrong answers. A liberal humanist, a strong supporter of black civil rights and of human rights, a visionary and a philosopher, Ted, like virtually everyone else in the science fiction world in the 1970s, was unable to see what was right before his eyes. I know for a fact that he read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for we discussed it during a late-night jaunt to Ship's coffeehouse. It never occurred to either of us to think of Ellison's novel as an example of black science fiction. I am sure, because he was a voracious and eclectic reader, that Ted was familiar with, if he had not himself read, the works of John A. Williams and Sam Greenlee. And yet he never mentioned them as writers within the genre of science fiction or even "speculative fiction," as some were beginning to call it. The failure to see what is, literally, right before our eyes has everything to do with how

we see what we see. In order to recognize and evaluate African American works of science fiction, readers and critics need first to be familiar with the traditions of African American literature and culture. As Gregory Rutledge (2000) cautions us, we cannot effectively "evaluate the creative efforts of black futurist fiction authors without a cultural predicate grounded in the black experience" (128).

Science fiction has always been the literature to which I turn for insight, intelligent entertainment, and thought-provoking argument. It's an inherited passion, as my mother was (and still is) addicted to the genre. While I was growing up she stored the "overflow" books from her collection in my bedroom. When, in community college, I began to study African American literature, I kept those course texts on other shelves. Before I reached graduate school, however, the lines had begun to blur, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, and John Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* all migrated from the African American literature shelf to the science fiction shelf, while Samuel R. Delany's books and Octavia Butler's books migrated to the African American literature shelf when I discovered, in the early 1980s, that each author is African American. To this day these books, and others like them, lead a nomadic existence, filed under whichever category seems most appropriate at any given moment.

White critics and audiences have often ignored and miscategorized books by African American writers, treating them, because of the race of their authors, as a breed apart. Earl A. Cash, in his study of John A. Williams (1975), describes the malign neglect of African American writers, the majority of whom have worked within a naturalist tradition since the turn of the last century. He notes, "As in social matters so it is in the literary: race became an inevitable determinant. What by a white writer was naturalism became by a black self-serving, paranoid exaggerations" (1). The books that I discuss in this essay have all been dismissed for exactly that reason.

This essay briefly outlines one subgenre of African American science fiction: the black militant near-future novel.[1] In each text to which I refer, African Americans join in violent revolution against the system of white supremacy. All embrace a philosophy that affirms that "only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed" and share "the view that moral concepts can be analyzed in terms of concepts applicable to natural phenomena."[2] It is not my goal here to substantively critique each work: each text and each author has been critiqued in isolation already (in some cases at length). Rather, my intent here is to define a genre and suggest that we might, as

scholars and activists, benefit from excavating the connections between these texts and begin to explore the implications of a distinguishable, though submerged, pattern of kill-the-white-folks futurist fiction in the African American literary tradition.

The four novels chiefly considered in this essay were, in their time, near-future histories in the naturalist vein: Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), George Schuyler's *Black Empire* (serialized in sixty-two installments from 1936 to 1938), John A. Williams's *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969), and Chester Himes's *Plan B* (begun in 1968 but still unfinished on his death in 1983). Griggs's novel partakes of the melodrama that went hand in hand with naturalist writing at the turn of the twentieth century, as exemplified by such tearjerkers as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), and Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905). Schuyler's serial novels are at home on a shelf with the naturalist melodrama writers of the day, including Horatio Alger and pioneering science fiction pulp writer Edgar Rice Burroughs. Himes's *Plan B* employs the gritty "street" credibility of noir and can, along with his other detective novels, easily be compared with the work of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* can be read comfortably alongside Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* as an urban novel of cause and effect, crime and consequence.

What separates these African American authors from their white peers, in addition to the double standard to which Earl Cash refers, are their roots in African American literary and folk traditions and their commitment to detailing the circumstances of their oppression: "the poverty, sickness, discrimination and sometimes joys" of being black in America (Cash 1975, 3). As Gilbert Muller says, "black artistic truth reveals essentially a failure in the underlying structures of white Western civilization and a proposal to set right those destructive social and political forces in nature" (31). In different degrees, these four texts reflect a profound pessimism about the possibility of achieving justice and equality "within the system." They present the argument that African Americans must revolt or succumb to slow death at the hands of their oppressors. Each features a secret society of dedicated revolutionaries, a charismatic leader or genius, a face-off between those blacks who advocate violence and those who cannot bring themselves to do so. None represent the best works of their authors, though they are all good books by excellent writers. It may be that the subject matter is too painful, the anger too hot, the conclusions too dire to stimulate and sustain the kind of creative energy that great writing requires. On the other hand, these texts and others that comprise the genre of black militant science fiction are far too important to over-

look, as they delineate the extent of the rage and violent potential in a long-oppressed population, righteous and desperate, if neither united nor organized, in its will to freedom and equality.

Use What You Have to Get What You Need

Science fiction and naturalism mesh comfortably, as Jack London early demonstrated in his 1915 story "The Star Rover" (Furer 2000, 108). Contemporary near-future natural disaster novels like the now-classic *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977) and the more recent *The Rift* (1999) continue to reach the bestseller lists. Black militant near-future tales are closely aligned to a definition of science fiction attributed to Gregory Benford: "SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible" (Gökçe 2001). As James E. Gunn underlines, science fiction "deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. . . . it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger."[3]

The visions in these books are fed by technology but not led by it. African American science fiction shares a cultural and social heritage with African American literature and, by extension, the traditions of African American arts. In this tradition the ingenuity of human beings is privileged over the products that they create. This emphasis on "soul," as African American historian Lerone Bennett describes it, is "very definitely nonmachine, but it is not antimachine; it simply recognizes that machines are generative power and not soul, instruments and not ends."[4] As social science fiction, their chief concern is with working out the organization and structure of a future society, and they do it the way African Americans have often done it—without access to cutting-edge, high-tech machinery. Rather, they meet the challenge of envisioning a new future most often by "making do with what they have." As Nelson, Tu, and Hines (2001) have noted, people of color are experts at "'refunctioning' old/obsolete technologies or inventing new uses for common ones," fashioning "technologies to fit their needs and priorities. In the process, they have become innovators, creating new aesthetic forms . . . new avenues for political action, and new ways to articulate their identities (8). All four texts make use of old technologies in new and unexpected ways. Their inventiveness is in their ready subversion of the familiar world of ordinary

objects. In Himes's *Plan B*, for example, rifles are anonymously conveyed to African Americans by floral delivery messengers, who carry long gift-wrapped boxes tied with red ribbons—the sort in which one would expect to find roses.[5] The entire sophisticated social mechanism for door-to-door delivery in 1960s Harlem is reemployed in a new and revolutionary cause. Only one novel, Schuyler's *Black Empire*, also relies on high-tech laboratories and facilities to bring about revolution. Even in that case, however, the money and influence needed to build and maintain an expensive technological base is initially earned in an illegal fashion or stolen from the wealthy white women mesmerized by the ingenious Dr. Belsidus.

Like most science fiction of the day, these texts are written by men and feature male protagonists. Women, when they are included, are secondary (though in the case of Schuyler's *Black Empire*, certainly quite strong) characters. The masculinist tendencies of the civil rights movement and the hyper-masculinist attitudes and self-presentation of the black power movement reinforce the already extremely sexist biases of the genre. These are not the books to read if one is searching for black women's perspectives on revolution and struggle. In fact, I have been able to locate no piece of writing by a black woman that could reasonably be described as belonging to this genre.[6] It is entirely a masculine production. My treatment of gender in this essay, therefore, will be limited to a discussion of the roles that female characters play in each novel and their implications for thinking about black militancy.

Neither the male nor female literary tradition of the slave narrative provides a positive model for revolt: "Even [slaves'] rational violent resistance nearly always ends in either terrible punishment or death, with the slaveholder sneering and triumphant" (Bryant 1997, 26). It was stealth, cunning, rescue, or luck that freed runaway slaves in the narratives published in the antebellum period. Revolt, however, was a part of the African American oral tradition from the beginning, and word spread quickly on plantations and farms when a slave armed him or herself against a master. Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner quickly became folk heroes, their names whispered in the slave quarters wherever the word could be spread. So, it is no surprise that black militancy and revolt, however viciously punished, was a feature of black novels from the first moment of Emancipation. Jerry Bryant traces their path in the texts of the three earliest novels written by male African Americans: William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859–62), and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). Each of these books, in greater or lesser detail, portrays sympathetically the armed insurrection of slaves. *Blake*, with its plan "for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slav-

ery"[7] was widely read and discussed in the African American literary community. It was likely the literary progenitor of the four novels under discussion and it set a precedent that has rarely been violated. The authors of black militant novels of armed resistance to and overthrow of white supremacy almost never attempt to describe postrevolutionary society and often abandon their protagonists before, in the middle of, or immediately after the battle. As in *Blake*, they often conclude on the very eve of insurrection.

Imperium in Imperio

In 1899 Sutton Griggs published *Imperium in Imperio*, a novel set approximately in the present day or near future. That was four years after Booker T. Washington's address at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition made the call for economic interdependence of the races combined with social segregation. It was six years before W. E. B. DuBois founded the Niagara Movement as a counter to Washington's accomodationist stance, and eleven years before the Springfield, Illinois, race riot resulted in the birth of the NAACP. When *Imperium* was written and published, violence against African Americans was at its height and black public awareness of, and opposition to, violent methods of oppression, particularly lynching, was at a sustained pitch (Bryant 1997, 72). Griggs was a young Baptist minister deeply involved in civil rights work and utterly opposed to Washington's admonition. The violence and segregation of the post-Reconstruction period doubtless formed the basis for his radicalization and perhaps influenced his decision to leave Texas for a seminary in Virginia, where he became a pastor. Though *Imperium* was his first and best-known novel, Griggs wrote five more and an indeterminate number of essays on philosophy and politics. Practicing as well as preaching economic self-sufficiency, he self-published all of his literary and nonfiction writing and peddled it door-to-door.[8]

By his middle years, though Griggs still supported integration, he appears to have discovered that whites were most likely to donate money to the churches of men who publicly promoted causes that did not threaten the status quo. However, his reliance on funding from whites was his downfall, and he abandoned his bankrupt church in Virginia in 1929 when the stock market crashed. He returned, apparently reluctantly, to Texas and died that same year. The trajectory from radical to conservative marks the careers of both Griggs and George S. Schuyler. Unlike Schuyler, however, Griggs was always what Wilson Jeremiah Moses (1988) calls a "genteel black nationalist," firmly middle class and,

despite his early militancy, rooted in European and American nationalist and separatist traditions that led to his later embrace of bourgeois assimilationist values. These early black militant novels are the products of youthful ire and fire, contrasting sharply with the later novels of John A. Williams and Chester Himes, which are the fruit of maturity and a long life of radical politics, anger, and frustration.

The phrase "Imperium in Imperio" means "a government independent of the general authorized government," a shadow government waiting in the wings for an opportunity to displace the existing government.[9] This is, indeed, the central plot of Griggs's novel, though it is not revealed until the final third of the novel, when the wealthy and successful black protagonist, Belton Piedmont, inducts his old school friend and recent fugitive from the law, the mulatto Bernard Belgrave, into the secret government Belton administers. After putting Bernard through a loyalty test in which Bernard believes he faces death, Belton explains that Bernard is now part of "[a]nother government, complete in every detail, exercising the sovereign right of life and death over its subjects . . . organized and maintained within the United States for many years. This government has a population of 7,250,000" (Griggs 1999, 190). The organization sustaining the shadow government, like Schuyler's Internationale, was founded and initially funded by a black scientist through "the publication of a book of science which outranked any other book of the day that treated of the same subject. . . . This wealthy negro secretly gathered other free negroes together and organized a society that had a two-fold object. The first object was to endeavor to secure for the free negroes all the rights and privileges of men, according to the teachings of Thomas Jefferson. Its other object was to secure the freedom of the enslaved negroes the world over" (191).

The book of science, Belton is careful to explain, "is now obsolete, science having made such great strides since his day." The reader is intended to grasp the fact that it is not science or technology that will set the negro free but a reliance upon the revolutionary ideals that brought the slave masters freedom from Britain. Science and technology are merely tools, as Lerone Bennett said: instruments, not ends. The chief tool used to spread news of the organization among reliable blacks was education, and that effort increased manyfold after Emancipation. Students "were instructed to pay especial attention of the United States during the revolutionary period" (193), and their new knowledge increased their outrage at the loss of rights suffered by southern blacks at the end of Reconstruction. "This secret organization of which we have been speaking decided that some means must be found to do what the government could not do, because of a defect in the Constitution. They decided to organize

a General Government that would protect the Negro in his rights" (194). The result is an alliance between all secret orders of African Americans, and all members of all secret orders were granted membership in the Imperium in Imperio after pledging their lives to the cause. Investments in southern land at the end of the Civil War had increased the fortune left by the scientist until it was worth half a billion dollars, placing the organization in a position secure enough to be ready and able to go to war against the U.S. government. And Bernard, Belton announces, is to be the new president.

Two subplots sustain the novel until it reveals the plot of revolution. The first is the friendship between Belton and Bernard, an alliance between a wealthy, light-skinned mulatto and a lower-class, dark-skinned African American. Though their white schoolteacher attempts to divide them by favoring the light-skinned Bernard, the two boys form a deep bond of companionship through an honest competition for excellence in all their endeavors. Their brilliance is evident from an early age, and by the time they graduate high school both are well known for their skills as historians and rhetoricians. At this time the two men part: wealthy Bernard goes to Harvard University and Belton, with the help of a wealthy white liberal patron, goes on to "Stowe," a small college in Nashville, Tennessee. At Stowe, Belton forms his first secret society, with the password of "Equality or Death" (59), and has his first taste of defying white authority. Bernard, after graduation, meets his influential white father, who tells him that he will come into $10 million and instructs him to attain power and influence, in which effort he will quietly be assisted by his father's social connections. Bernard becomes an attorney, runs for Congress, and triumphs over a corrupt electoral process, securing himself fame and continuing fortune.

Belton, as we might expect, has a rougher time of it. His quiet life as a schoolteacher in a colored school in Richmond, Virginia, is destroyed when he starts up a newspaper and is fired from his teaching position for writing inflammatory articles. He secures and loses a series of menial jobs. Belton's luck finally turns when he is invited back to Stowe College to take charge of the institution. Again his outspoken nature gets him into trouble, and he becomes the victim of a lynching in which he is actually hanged and shot in the head, but not killed. Unconscious, he revives on a dissection table, escapes, and seeks justice from the governor, who puts him in jail; he is saved only by Bernard's influence and brilliant defense, after which he takes charge of Thomas Jefferson College in Waco, Texas, and devotes himself to the Imperium full-time. As he reveals, Belton has been a member of the secret organization since college.

Throughout the text, the differences in the opportunities and the

security offered to dark- and light-skinned blacks are highlighted. The fact that neither Bernard nor Belton will succumb to the forces that seek to divide them underlines their noble natures. And yet, when a confused Bernard asks Belton why he has, for so long, been excluded from the Imperium, Belton answers:

> The relation of your mother to the Anglo-Saxon race has not been clearly understood, and you and she have been under surveillance for many years . . . . It was not until recently deemed advisable to let you in, your loyalty to the race never having fully been tested . . . . Various young men have been put forward for [the honor of the office of President] and vigorous campaigns have been waged in their behalf. But these all failed of the necessary unanimous vote. At last, one young man arose, who was brilliant and sound, genial and true, great and good. On every tongue was his name and in every heart his image. Unsolicited by him, unknown to him, the nation by its unanimous voice has chosen him the President of our beloved Government. . . . You, sir, are President of the Imperium in Imperio. (197–98)

In the same speech Belton informs Bernard that his light skin makes him a target of suspicion, and that all of black America agrees that Bernard is the pinnacle of the race. In the end, it is the mulatto Bernard who becomes the driving force behind a violent revolution—Bernard, who has not suffered overmuch from prejudice or discrimination. And it is Belton who sacrifices his life for the cause of nonviolence—Belton, who has been lynched and beaten and who has struggled all his life to be accepted as a man.

The tale of the Imperium and of both men is narrated by a third party, Berl Trout, who votes for the execution of Belton and fires the shot that kills him. Trout, horrified by his deed, decides to reveal the existence of the Imperium "so that it might be broken up or watched" (264). In the terms of the book, and in Belton's own words, this is the action of a traitorous coward. Trout's decision to commit an act condemned by both Belton and Bernard certainly brings his good character into question, and thus undermines his portrait of Bernard as a mad destroyer.

Though the contest in the book is between men of opposing opinion, it is important to examine the role that women play in this text. The mothers of both boys exert a strong influence upon them, shape their morals, and instill good values. Both mothers suffer: Hannah Piedmont struggles to feed her five children; the wealthy Fairfax Belgrave suffers a broken heart due to an enforced separation from her white husband.

Both men fall deeply in love, and their relationships to the women they love affect and are affected by their political commitments. Bernard courts the middle-class, dark-skinned, African-featured Viola Martin, who

cares for him but will not marry him. When Bernard presses too hard, Viola commits suicide, leaving behind a note explaining that though she loves him, she cannot marry a mulatto because she once read in a book that "that the intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race" (178).

The stories of Bernard's and Belton's love relationships are the least credible in the text. The behavior of the female characters is neither sympathetic nor comprehensible. That Viola, who fears the extinction of her people, should choose to kill herself for love rather than to live in sacrifice in a marriage with a dark-skinned man, producing children for her race, is implausible. But it is not with Viola that Griggs is concerned. Her suicide serves to create the moment of despair in which Bernard is summoned by Belton and will be most receptive to the revelation of the Imperium in Imperio. He is charged by Viola to commit himself to a struggle against miscegenation and, if that fails, to lead their people to another land where they can live free from the threat of interbreeding. Thus, at the end, when Bernard declares war and passes up the option of emigration, he violates Viola's trust. He also violates his mother's trust by urging violence against whites (and thus, theoretically, endangering the life of her husband and his father).

Belton weds the middle-class, light-skinned, European-featured Antoinette Nermal but then abandons her in horror when she has a fair-skinned child. They are not reconciled until immediately before his execution, when he visits his wife's home and finds that the child has darkened with age and is his spitting image, though "a shade darker." He goes to his death "proud of his noble wife, proud of his promising son" (259). Belton's abandonment of Antoinette is motivated by his anger and embarrassment and his belief that Antoinette has succumbed to the temptations that an interracial relationship might offer, a temptation made more attractive because of Belton's inability to properly support her.

Belton himself knows something of the temptations to which he fears Antoinette has succumbed, since during the low period in which he moved from job to job he was forced to disguise himself as a black woman and take work as a nurse. He was pressured to grant sexual favors to young white men of the families for whom he worked, and when he resisted too long and too loudly, he was eventually kidnapped (probably with the intent of rape) and exposed as male. This period of cross-dressing serves the purpose of giving Belton a "universal" understanding of the plight of African Americans, transcending the barriers of gender. The description of his masquerade is the antithesis of camp, and Belton's experience as a woman is never made to seem ridiculous.

It is Belton's mistaken conclusion that Antoinette has "fallen" to the blandishments of a white man that moves him to treat her, in his heart, as if she had died. In Grigg's terms, Belton's abandonment of Antoinette relieves Belton of all familial responsibilities and allows him to devote himself entirely to the work of building the Imperium, unhampered by feminine concerns. Their final reunion reestablishes Belton as a family man and therefore humanizes him in comparison to the now monomaniacal Bernard. But the reader is left to wonder about Belton's initial and incorrect decision to condemn and abandon his wife and to measure that against his depiction, by Trout, as a man of sterling character.

Reading through the lens of the black power movement, Gloria T. Hull (1978) claims that though "artistically flawed," Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* can be considered a work of "socialist realism" because it "presents a secret, elaborately-organized black 'nation within a nation' which is steadily transforming American society" (151). Though calling the author "ham-handed with symbols," critic Jerry Bryant (1997) claims that Sutton Griggs had a knack for portraying the irreconcilable differences between conservative and radical positions in black politics (91). But where Hull focuses on Grigg's naturalist style, Bryant describes the alternate history aspect of *Imperium in Imperio*: "In a kind of fusion of the John of Revelation and the John Bunyan of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Griggs creates a visionary world in which Bernard Belgrave is revealed as an anguished but fanatical avenger, whose violent plans could ignite an apocalypse which Berl [Trout] 'sees' in his mind's eye."

While the book's narrator takes a final stand against what he sees as an ultimately evil decision to destroy white society, Bryant argues that the text as a whole "warns of the dangers of continued white violence that could ignite a holocaust in the dried tinder of black rage" (92). Neither does Griggs himself seem to take a position, leaving it for the readers to find their own heroes and make their own choices. This authorial decision to withhold judgment and to force the reader into a moral quandary is common to all of the near-future black militant novels discussed in this essay and, indeed, is a feature of the genre. Griggs's work serves as an excellent model for future work, and we will see in the texts discussed below the repetition of the contest between violence and nonviolence. We will also see that the theme of male friendship is central to the genre, as is the marginalization of women and their competing symbolic value. Finally, the act of betrayal is central to each work.

The theme of male friendship is central to the genre, as is the marginalization of women and their competing symbolic value. Finally, the act of betrayal is central to each work.

It is important, for the purposes of this argument, to make the distinction between black near-future fantasy and black near-future science fiction. Fantasy is a genre of its own and deserves serious treatment, but it is distinguished from science fiction because it relies on supernatural or metaphysical means to achieve its ends. Black near-futurist fantasies eschew the "mood and attitude of science" (see Benford's definition of science fiction above) for the worlds of fable, myth, dreams, magic, and spirituality. Some of the greatest African American writers have worked within this genre, and the alternate worlds they have produced include William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer* (1962), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), A. R. Flowers's *De Mojo Blues* (1986), and Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage* (1990). Women writers have been particularly active in employing fantasy in their works and in relying upon spirituality as a means of resolving the tension between violence and nonviolence, particularly in the postsixties era. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982) all use magic and spiritual transcendence as metaphors for healing the world and making things right.

The genre of black militant near-futurist fiction, however, is built upon the renunciation of that spirituality and belief in magic. In no text in this genre is hard science more celebrated than George Schuyler's sprawling *Black Empire*, a work never intended for publication in a single volume; it was written in sixty-two installments for the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1936 to 1938. Quite a bit of recent work has been done on Schuyler, both as a figure of the Harlem Renaissance and as a writer, but most of the criticism focuses on Schuyler's comic masterpiece, *Black No More* (1931). Equally science-focused, *Black No More* tells the story of Junius Crookman, African American doctor and inventor (and genius), and his invention of a medical process that can turn black people whiter than white people. A witty and merciless indictment of all that the young, radical, socialist Schuyler found reprehensible in both black and white culture, the book still appeals to audiences today and has enjoyed a great revival since its republication by Northeastern University Press in 1989. Following the success of *Black No More*, in 1991 Northeastern published a well-researched, painstakingly compiled, and carefully contextualized edition of the collected serial episodes that Schuyler wrote under his own name or his pseudonym, Samuel I. Brooks: *"The Black Internationale" and "Black Empire."* The text was edited by scholars Robert A. Hill and R. Kent Rassmussen, who wrote a lengthy

afterword, and it was introduced by none other than John A. Williams, who places *Black Empire* in a continuum that includes Chester Himes's *Plan B* and his own *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (Williams 1991, xv).

Williams, who was acquainted with Schuyler in the period after Schuyler's conversion to conservatism and who has many good reasons for not feeling charitably toward the man,[10] finds a single strong point of praise for *Black Empire*, remarking at length on Schuyler's genius as a science fiction writer:

> As I read of black ingenuity in these novels, I had the sense that Schuyler must have been reading copiously, including, perhaps, the works of H. G. Wells and the popular science magazines of the day. His Black Internationale intellectuals develop hydroponics or aquicultural farming (growing vegetables in water) in the U.S. and transfer the process to Africa. I don't think this was recognized as a viable method to grow food until the Israelis began to use it, mainly through the drip process, after 1948.
>
> We began to hear about underground aircraft facilities when the Gulf War began early in 1991. The Saudi Arabians had them and it was believed the Iraqis did, too. But we find them in Black Empire over half a century earlier. Schuyler's heroes and heroines (ahead of his time there, too) developed what we now call the fax machine, skipping over the telecopier that actually preceded the development of the fax. Television, in its swaddling clothes at the time Schuyler wrote the serials, is fully developed here and used in the closed-circuit mode. Undoubtedly, the conception of solar heat for energy had been considered for some time, if not used in rudimentary form. Schuyler's Black Internationale organization develops and uses solar collectors for the energy needed to run its buildings and machines. Once settled in Africa, its members dine on health foods—almost no meat but plenty of vegetables produced artificially, and no coffee or tea, only natural juice.
>
> On the grimmer side, Schuyler foreshadows the gas chambers the Germans used so prodigiously in World War II, when Martha Gaskin, having gathered the leaders of British industry into a concert hall in London, seals the door and turns on the gas. Similarly, allusions are made in the African scenes to mass euthanasia to rid the race of disease, practiced without benefit of any Nuremberg-like laws. Dr. Belsidus, in the final analysis, is a dictator, a fascist, although his goals are established as moral ones. (xiii–xiv)

In Williams's opinion this seems to be just about all that *Black Empire* has going for it as a literary work, with the single exception of its theme of "revenge, racial redemption and release from white oppression." Missing, Williams argues, is the "mixture of garlic and the tartest possible lemon" that flavored *Black No More*. Absent were "the snakewhip wit and wordplay, . . . the perception and sardonicism" that his other published work has shown (xv).

The plot of *Black Empire* is fairly simple, comprised of "setups," as Williams describes them. Dr. Henry Belsidus (whose name continues the tradition of naming revolutionaries with names that begin with "B") is an unscrupulous genius utterly dedicated to the proposition of freeing his black brethren from their oppression in the United States and bringing them to well-armed safety in the arms of Mother Africa. Narrated by the initially dubious *Harlem Blade* reporter Carl Slater, each episode further reveals the seemingly limitless powers and resources of the genius Belsidus. Slater resigns his position as reporter in order to devote all of his time to chronicling Belsidus's life and the growth of the Black Internationale. In *Black Empire* Slater plays the more moderate Belton to Dr. Belsidus's obsessively focused pro-violence Bernard. In this text, however, the promoter of violence is dark-skinned, with distinctly African features, and his enemies are of all shades, from whites to dark-skinned "race traitors." The "color line" drawn in *Black Empire* is less subtle than in *Imperium in Imperio*, and it is played out more among the women who compete for Dr. Belsidus's attention.

Dr. Belsidus is an early example of what both John A. Williams and Chester Himes would later call the "superspade," the all-powerful black man who is, in *Shaft*'s blaxploitation terms, "a sex magnet with all the chicks." His potency in the bedroom underlines his effectiveness as a leader. Just as Griggs employed Viola and Antoinette as devices to further his plot and to attribute certain qualities to his protagonist, so Schuyler creates the characters of Martha Gaskin, the beautiful white woman who is devoted to Dr. Belsidus but can never truly possess him, and Patricia Givens, the equally beautiful African American pilot who is Dr. Belsidus's true match. Gaskins's role is to emphasize how powerful Dr. Belsidus truly is. As his devoted servant, she works for his revolution and herself engineers the mass gassing of the business class of Britain. Without compunction, she betrays her own people and kills for him. And because he has mastered both white and black women with his superpotency and brilliance, Belsidus is shown to be more masculine and much stronger than white men, who cannot even hold on to their own women. Givens is, for her time, an extremely active and competent black female character. She plans and executes dangerous missions, has the strength to give orders and make them stick, and comes as close as anyone to being the intellectual equal of Belsidus. All of her energy is subsumed in Belsidus's cause, prefiguring the loyal helpmeet of sixties black militant propaganda.[11] That both women survive for the duration of the novels—and presumably beyond—is indication of the stability of Dr. Belsidus's reign and his power to protect the women under his control. Furthermore, their influence and importance is undermined by the constant presence of the

male narrator. It is to Carl Slater, rather than to either woman, that Belsidus explains his plans, provides his rationalizations, and waxes elaborate about his beliefs and philosophies. It is Carl, in the end, whom Belsidus must convince in order to earn his legitimacy.

The far more radical *Black Empire* has received much less critical attention than *Black No More*—so little attention, in fact, that the refusal to discuss the book seems less accidental than the result of deliberate avoidance. Hill and Rassmussen underline how odd it is that earlier Schuyler scholars like Michael Peplow never uncovered "The Black Internationale" or "Black Empire" serials since Schuyler did publish quite a few of them under his own name. They suggest that any careful researcher could have recovered the work (Schuyler 1991, 255). Peplow (1980) calls Schuyler a "Black Yankee" with "traditional Yankee virtues like self-discipline, independence, thrift and industry." He sees Schuyler as a "sort of Black Horatio Alger" (18). Had he uncovered these installments, Peplow would have been hard-pressed to maintain that Schuyler's life followed the trajectory from "youthful idealist" to "pessimistic reactionary" (113), since *Black Empire*'s pessimism is impossible to deny.

Jerry Bryant, who in his 1997 critical study of violence in the African American novel, *Victims and Heroes*, goes out of his way to mention (and condemn) such minor black militant near-futurist texts of the seventies as Chuck Stone's *King Strut* (1970), Blyden Jackson's *Operation Burning Candle* (1973), and Nivi-Kofi A. Easley's *The Militants* (1974), completely ignores the existence of *Black Empire* (in print again, by then, for eight years) despite the fact that Schuyler's text could serve him well as a model for the later books he discusses. Bryant writes off Schuyler in under two pages, mentioning *Black No More* as a "mordant parody" taking place in a "zany, impossible, pseudo-science fiction world that anticipates Nathaniel West's mad Horatio Alger travesty, *A Cool Million*" (149). The extreme satire in *Black Empire* contradicts Bryant's thesis that the hallmark of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance is a recognition of enough "progress" made on "the whole color issue" that lynching is no longer such a pressing matter. *Black Empire* seems to suggest that not only is the oppression of blacks still vigorous in the United States but that African Americans have stored up enough anger and hatred for white people that Schuyler's serials could attract a devoted readership whose interest kept the series alive for two years. One may imagine that these readers, who were not themselves revolutionaries, or even necessarily supporters of violence, took a certain pleasure in imagining white people getting their comeuppance at the hands of a black genius and his army.

Some conservative critics, like Mark Gauvreau Judge, left *Black Empire* alone because they couldn't assimilate it. Judge praised Schuyler

and *Black No More* in an article in *Policy Review* in 2000. Lauding Schuyler for his anticommunism, Judge calls him "the Black Whittaker Chambers" (41). Then he condemns the "liberal elites" who control the media for keeping Schuyler out of the limelight for so long. Although *Black Empire* had been available for over a decade at the time Judge wrote the review and even the most cursory research would have made him aware of its existence, he omits any mention of the book. *Black Empire* is a text so radical that its mere existence would disqualify Schuyler as a candidate for the Hall of Good Negroes, in which Judge is attempting to mount his head.

Some criticism (including Williams's) indicts *Black Empire* for its apparent lack of humor, particularly when compared to the easily accessible satire in *Black No More*. But it is hardly possible that Schuyler wrote this work straight-faced, and much more probable that he found the process uproarious, as he claimed in a letter to the *Courier* staff: "I have been greatly amused by the public enthusiasm for 'The Black Internationale,' which is hokum and hack work of the purest vein. I deliberately set out to crowd as much race chauvinism and sheer improbability into it as my fertile imagination could conjure. The result vindicates my low opinion of the human race" (Schuyler 1991, 260).

Though even Robert Hill and R. Kent Rassmussen lament *Black Empire*'s lack of the "droll humor characteristic of *Black No More*," it is far from clear that the text is indeed humorless. The sheer outrageousness of the events described, the unbelievable volume of violence and abuse meted out to whites by blacks, the hyperbolic style and the seeming omnipotence of Dr. Belsidus all suggest that few African American readers of the day could sit there and consume these serials straight-faced. In this sense *Black Empire* filled the same function as its pulp peers: escapist fantasy combined with underlying cultural critique, designed for a public dissatisfied with their lived reality. If we judge *Black Empire* in this light we are not limited to discussing its literary merit; rather, we can begin to consider the attraction that the kill-the-white-people fantasy has for black Americans and to understand its implications. This may be deeply uncomfortable for black and white critics alike, most of whom do not seem inclined to acknowledge that this level of hostility may exist.

White Critics and the Black Militant Near-Future Novel

Chester Himes never seemed to have any problem admitting the level of hatred and distrust he had for white people, and that may, in part, be the reason that his literary work has been given far less attention than it

deserves. It is certainly the reason why he left the United States forever and went to Europe. At a lecture titled "Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States," Himes told his audience:

> To hate white people is one of the first emotions an American Negro develops when he becomes old enough to learn what his status is in American Society. He must, of necessity, hate white people. He would not be—and it would not be human if he did not—develop a hatred for his oppressors. At some time in the lives of every American Negro there has been this hatred for white people; there are no exceptions. It could not possibly be otherwise. (Quoted in Lundquist 1976, 16)

His audience, Himes recalls in his autobiography, sat in stunned silence. He had broken a deep taboo and no one knew how to respond. Yet his voice was only the first of many that would swell into a full chorus crescendo in the late sixties and early seventies. Himes's *Plan B* and John A. Williams's *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* are only two parts of a far larger whole comprised of the farthest-out kill-the-white-folks fantasies of the black militant literary movement.

That white people were bound to misunderstand black militant near-future novels was assured. Their general ignorance of black culture guaranteed that black satire aimed at black audiences would simply not make it onto their radar. A tendency to take literature (especially literature by minorities) literally, an uncritical acceptance of racial stereotypes, and a lack of facility with the brilliant pyrotechnics of African American vernacular made it likely that few white readers would see these novels as anything other than trashy, cartoonish, and crude. Most white critics totally ignored their existence.

Of the few who did not, Jerry Bryant serves as an excellent example of the sort of misreading that is made possible by privileging preconceived notions over cultural immersion. Bryant begins with Toni Morrison's description of the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*:

> There is a society. It's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don't initiate anything; they don't even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can.[12]

Bryant quotes this passage to illustrate "the imagery that emerged in the mid-1960s in the African American novel of violence. It is at this point, he asserts, that the organized revolutionary group becomes a popular way to express the anger of many black Americans" (1997, 237). But both

Griggs and Schuyler have been down this road before, over a half a century earlier, and it is curious that although Bryant is demonstrably familiar with the works of both authors (and it is unlikely that he never came across Schuyler's *Black Empire*), he chooses to overlook the existence of pre-1960s novels of armed revolution.

Bryant's biases leads him to grossly miscategorize the novels he discusses, lumping together serious black militant novels like John Oliver Killens's *Sippi* (1967) with seriocomic extravaganzas like Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by The Door* (1969), Chuck Stone's *King Strut* (1970), Blyden Jackson's *Operation Burning Candle* (1973), and Nivi-Kofi A. Easley's *The Militants* (1974) (248–50). He entirely misses the satirical and playful aspects of these black militant texts. Written in the era immediately preceding and during the explosion of the blaxploitation film, it seems both disingenuous and completely wrong-headed to read them as "straight" novels.

Bryant devotes much of *Victims and Heroes* to mustering arguments to challenge African American critic Addison Gayle, with whom he clearly has a bone to pick. Bryant's a shill for universalism and "great" literature. He therefore contests Gayle's assertion that there are uniquely black qualities in literature, and that the best black literature relies on those qualities and rejects white ideas and interpretations. Most of all, he fights against the idea that African American culture has inherent worth, unrelated to the "universal" messages of its "greatest" authors. His blindness to the black aesthetic ensures that he will misread the very novels that he chooses to use as ammunition in his attempt to undermine Gayle.

Bryant so misunderstands Gayle and is so unfamiliar with black culture—particularly black humor—that he mistakes outrageous, satirical, and ironic examples of wildly exaggerated street-culture–meets–over-the-top-fantasy novels for the serious works of literary naturalism that Gayle praises. Bryant makes the same mistake with much of the black power rhetoric he quotes. The Panthers used the hyperbolic rhetoric of the street (dozens, signifyin') with the same panache they donned their black leather coats, tilted their black berets, and publicly shouldered their guns. To miss this *is* to miss black culture—not a surprising mistake on Bryant's part, since he insists on his right to view it entirely through white lenses.

It's hard to imagine Bryant attempting to place potboiler romances or pulp science fiction novels in the same continuum as "literary" works if he were working with mainstream white literature. But Bryant apparently places all African American novels in the same category and then ranks them from "good" to "bad." An astute critic would recognize that these black militant futurist or alternative present novels actually did belong to a different genre than self-consciously literary creations by established

authors like John A. Williams. It would make far more sense to connect these kill-the-white-people black militant novels to the seriocomic tradition established by comics like Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory and by the outrageously funny examples of critique and commentary offered by Dolemite than to the literary tradition of the black novelist. As Darius James, a young black teenager in the years encompassing the publication of Greenlee, Moreau, Easley, and the like explains in *That's Blaxploitation! Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude*: "My teenage agenda was simple. 1. Get high. 2. Overthrow the U.S. government. 3. And fuck big-boobed white girls" (1995, xix). James is ironic both about his agenda and about the genre that he says shaped his youthful ideals—blaxploitation. He, or young men like him, were likely consumers of these black militant novels, perhaps in part because the comic book tradition lacked a decent supply of black superheroes. Black militant novels, like blaxploitation films, speak with a double tongue, despite their seeming Simplicity.[13]

Plan B and *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*

It is with Bryant's misinterpretation in mind that I'd like to approach Himes's *Plan B* and Williams's *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*. Both books were written during approximately the same period. Although Himes's *Plan B* was not published until after his death in 1984, the book was substantially finished by 1971, with only minor changes in the ensuing years. It is thus better read as a product of the earlier era. Both Williams and Himes published novels the critics liked far better. Bryant, for example, waxes rhapsodic about Williams's earlier work, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967):

> *The Man Who Cried I Am* is not an opportunistic exploitation of a chic market fashion, nor is it a puerile fantasy. It is an attempt to make meaning out of a set of events that Williams would rather not have to face. . . . There is no stereotypical black militancy in this novel. . . . Williams does not resort to simple reversal or get any vindictive pleasure in imagining the deaths of whites or the superior ability of blacks to kill. Melancholy pervades this novel, not heroic anger or righteous resentment or revolutionary fervor. (1997, 255–56)

Bryant declares *The Man Who Cried I Am* "one of the best American novels of the decade" (252). What seems to particularly attract him is its message that despite their victimization at the hands of whites, "African Americans can be as petty and self-serving, grasping and self-centered, as anyone else" (256). As far as Bryant is concerned, this is one more nail in

the coffin of the black aesthetic. Since many black militant novels make the same point (Schuyler, for one, is a master of the intraracial lampoon), it is hard to see this as a real distinction between Williams's work and the work of other authors described in this essay. More likely, the literary qualities of *The Man Who Cried I Am* make the book more accessible to a critic such as Bryant. And perhaps, also, that is why Bryant reduces his critique of *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* to a single paragraph, describing protagonist Eugene Browning as an "heir" to Max Reddick, the protagonist of *The Man Who Cried I Am*.

While Max Reddick does not commit himself to violence before he is killed, Eugene Browning "concludes, only with reluctance, that violent confrontation is necessary. Blacks have exhausted every other recourse and want desperately to make their country healthy, to heal the division between races. Violence is like the shock treatment one authorizes for a beloved relative" (257). This plot places the book squarely into the larger category of black militant novels he despises and perhaps provides an explanation for Bryant's reluctance to dwell on it.

Critics did recognize the book as futurist fiction, and most of them noted the near-future setting in their reviews. Earl Cash, in his study of Williams (1975), says of the book:

> *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* . . . presents the black man's response to the white treachery in *The Man Who Cried I Am*. Max Reddick had concluded that interracial conflict was inevitable. Browning not only recognizes the inevitability of the conflict but begins preparing himself for a role in that conflict. It is fitting, too, that the story takes place in the future. The author had described in past books what was to come if whites did not respond to black cries for justice. In *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* the clash begins in 1973, the not-too-distant future from the vantage point of 1969. (109–10)

Gilbert Muller, in his own study (1984), underlines the importance of the future setting in encouraging the reader to believe that action may still be taken to prevent the nation from coming to such a pass: "*Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* is subtitled, 'A Novel of Some Probability.' What Williams describes is indeed probable, and the book may serve the dual purpose of warning whites of what may be imminent if black/white relations are not improved as well as warning blacks of the pitfalls of which they must beware if they decide to rebel" (112).

Williams's credentials as a naturalist writer are well established, as John M. Reilly (1987) demonstrates in his scholarly work on *The Man Who Cried I Am*. According to Muller, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* (1969), and *Captain Blackman* (1972) comprise a trilogy that can be compared to the great work of another Ameri-

can naturalist writer: John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Muller remarks, "Dos Passos is one of the few writers to whom Williams will acknowledge a literary debt" (1984, xiii).

Williams also admits, in an unpublished autobiographical sketch in 1978, that he had a youthful fascination with pulp fiction and read "anything . . . by [Edgar Rice] Burroughs" (Muller 1984, 5, n. 7). Williams saw *Sons of Darkness* as a sort of pulp novel as well, describing it in terms reminiscent of Schuyler discussing *Black Empire*:

> *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* in many ways was a pot boiler for me anyhow. I sat down and wrote it comparatively quickly compared to my other books. This was a reaction to my continued poverty after *The Man Who Cried I Am* came along. . . . So I sat down and wrote this book. I think it's one of my worst novels. It brought in more paperback money than *The Man Who Cried I Am*. . . . The things that are crap or tend to be crap . . . always for some reason do better. (Quoted in Cash 1975, 138)

The contest between violence and nonviolence in *Sons of Darkness* is played out, once again, between two old friends. Eugene Browning (yet another revolutionary beginning with "B"—it is getting hard to believe that this is all coincidence) is a college professor who decides to quit his teaching job to work for a civil rights organization, the Institute for Racial Justice, full-time. The pro-violence and anti-violence roles in this novel are delegated to several different characters who represent various positions. Don Mantini is the Italian godfather who, curious about Browning's decision to hire a hit man to kill a racist police officer, decides to meet with Browning anonymously. The two develop a friendship, though Browning is unaware of Mantini's identity. Mantini shares with Browning his theoretical knowledge about the implications of violence and admires Browning for his commitment and passion. In comparison to a criminal world where people kill for profit and revenge, Browning looks distinctly noble.

If one thinks of Mantini as murder's upper-level management, then the second important character, Itzhak Hod, is a member of its working class. Hod, an Israeli, is an assassin, a "plumber" for the mob, a tragicomic figure cogently described by Muller: "A Polish Jew who has fought and killed anti-Semites, Fascists, Nazis, Arabs, and an assortment of political victims all his life, Hod is a killer with a heart and soul. He is an internationalist who carries with him . . . the horrors of the twentieth century. Hod is the philosopher of death, the connoisseur of killing" (1984, 91–92).

Browning also has lesser relationships, one with Jessup, a black militant who has worked out a bizarre arrangement with the John Birch Society (perhaps a reference to the young Schuyler, who Williams claims

embraced conservatism far earlier than is thought, and who did, in fact, have a relationship with the John Birch Society) (Williams 1991, xiv). He interacts with two other black revolutionaries and winds up imprisoning one of them, Leonard Trotman, in a closet over Labor Day weekend to ensure that Trotman can't inform on a bombing.

Betrayal is, without doubt, one of the major themes in this novel. It is, in Williams's estimation, part of contemporary black militant culture:

> In the first place—it may be a Black thing. I don't know—we seem to abhor secrecy. You can't have a militant black group in this country unless it's infiltrated. It's just impossible. The only groups you can have that are valid and functioning and haven't done anything yet are those that operated in total secrecy. We just don't seem to be able to pull that off. I think that's what's totally necessary in this society that is shot through with surveillance systems, peoples, codes, and so forth. (Quoted in Muller 1984, 94)

Political and personal betrayals abound in *Sons of Darkness*. Browning's daughter Nora betrays him by dating a white boy. Carrigan, the doomed police officer, betrays his wife with another woman. Browning betrays his old friend Herb Dixon for money to fund his scheme to assassinate the white police officer. Browning betrays Trotman by locking him in the closet. And when Browning returns home at the end of the novel he finds he's been betrayed by his wife Val, who is having an affair.

The women in the novel carry the moral weight in terms of judging character and intent. It is Itzhak Hod, oddly enough, who winds up playing Belton's role and giving up his career as an assassin to settle with his young wife, Mickey, in Israel. Mickey's love redeems him and gives him the strength and security to make a decision he knows is correct. Val's affair is a judgment on Browning's withdrawal, and it ceases as soon as he returns and asserts himself as her husband. Williams's women, though sometimes more sympathetically drawn, have no more agency than in other works in the genre.

Williams has an intimate connection to the final novel I wish to discuss. Chester Himes was "one of his favorite writers and friends" (Muller 1984, 31), and Himes discussed the writing of *Plan B* with Williams in interviews and personal correspondence. Williams called Himes "our single greatest naturalist writer" (quoted in Sallis 2000, 226) but waxes ambivalent about the author's posthumous publication:

> *Plan B* remains a puzzle to me, because it does not begin to make clear the crucial, connected point Himes discussed back then: "It's a calculated risk, you know, whether they would try to exterminate the black man, which I don't think they could do. I don't think the Americans have the capacity, like

the Germans, of exterminating six million. I don't think the white American man could. Morally, I don't think he could do this." I characterized that as a "jive morality." I disagreed with Himes then and do now. Only once in Plan B does the author arrive at this point, where American morality is put to the test, in a couple of lines of dialogue at the novel's strange and disappointing end. And this is precisely why I believe the book will always be an incomplete testimony to his beliefs. (1996, 492)

In *Plan B* the brilliant Tommson Black[14] (a revolutionary rather than a Dr. Belsidus–style fascist) conceives of and funds a plan to distribute weapons to African Americans in the hopes that they will mount a revolution directed by Black's organization, Chitterlings, Inc. The novel also represents the conclusion of Himes's Harlem detective cycle since it ends in the death of bothprotagonists: Grave Digger kills Coffin Ed, and Tommson Black kills Grave Digger. The plot, as Williams and other reviewers note, is not well constructed. In fact it's pretty well nonexistent, and *Plan B* is more easily read as a montage of fragments, some more developed than others, from at least two potential novels. Most compelling are the individual scenes of murder and mayhem and seemingly random violence. Or rather, the violence is seemingly random only to the uneducated white observer:

> It is the accumulation of past deeds that is the trigger, and therein lies the foundation of absurdity of the novel. For most white people the past is over and done with; but for most black people it is the past that has made them what they are; they know white people will never release them from the past because they cannot do so without losing the misplaced belief in their superiority. But this past is there, as it must be, or the present doesn't exist, all of which is, of course, absurd. The remembrance of things past is nothing if not everything. (Williams 1996, 493)

Despite the fragmentary and episodic nature of the novel, the tension between violence and nonviolence—or in this case, the tension between more violence and less violence—is certainly palpable at the end. As Williams says, this last scene tells us clearly that there is "the Grave Digger way, the Coffin Ed way, or the Tommson Black way" (493), and they are mutually exclusive and they each require a betrayal.

Even the female characters partake of the general madness and violence in the novel. In the opening and perhaps most powerful chapter, a rifle is delivered to a Harlem apartment. The woman of the couple, Tang, is excited by the rifle and the note that accompanies it: "WARNING!! DO NOT INFORM POLICE!!! LEARN YOUR WEAPON AND WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS!!! . . . FREEDOM IS NEAR!!!" Her man, T-bone,

is terrified and wants to turn the rifle in. They get into an altercation over the rifle and Tang threatens to shoot him if he calls the police. When he makes a grab for the rifle she pulls the trigger, but the gun is unloaded. In a blind rage he slashes her to death. And in the final scene, after Black has executed Grave Digger, a beautiful black woman walks into the room looks around the room and asks Black why he committed the murder. She listens to his response and her words are the final words of the book: "I hope you know what you're doing" (Himes 1993, 203). These women represent a radical departure from the archetypal woman in Himes's earlier novels, who tended to be a "seductive, curvy, amoral sex-pot with very light skin" (Skinner 1989, 22). Both of the dark-skinned women undermine male authority. The first pays for it with her life, but the second gets the last word. In *Plan B* the whole world is turned on its head.

It is useful, at this point, to remember what Himes had to say about the absurd nature of racism and about absurdity in general:

> Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of racism, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life. (Quoted in Muller 1989, 11)

Black militant near-future fiction is a genre that lends itself to the expression of that absurdity. To read it without knowledge or understanding of African American culture is to miss its meaning and, most important, to fail to get the jokes.

Slip the Yoke

In this essay I've argued for the definition of a new subgenre of African American science fiction: the black militant near-future novel. I've examined four works that fall comfortably within the genre and mentioned several more that could easily be included. The black militant near-future novel falls within both the African American and the naturalist literary traditions and meets the definitions of science fiction as well. Works belonging to this subgenre generally focus on a future in which African Americans engage in armed rebellion against their white oppressors, and they feature the following themes: secret societies, charismatic leaders, tension between positions of violence and nonviolence, differing status among African Americans (often symbolized by skin color), and marginalization

of women characters, whose sole purpose is to further the plot and enhance our understanding of the protagonist.

These novels often make use of low-tech solutions to problems of supply, organization, and maintenance of revolutionary organizations, focusing on human relationships rather than always using cutting-edge technology. In this sense, they are related to other contemporary science fiction works outside the subgenre by black American writers, including Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Steven Barnes, whose works also reflect the sensibility described by Lerone Bennett early in this article: technology as "instruments and not ends," useful for their "generative power," but lacking in the soul that provides the African American aesthetic with its unique power. It is my hope that the description of this subgenre provided in this article will both illuminate and clarify some of the long-neglected works of black militant writers and will help critics to reclaim these works and to situate them within the various traditions upon which they draw.

The soundtrack for this essay has been Anthony Braxton, Charlie Mingus, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler. During breaks from writing I'd put Richard Pryor in the CD player. In an amazing moment of synchronicity, I happened to choose *That Nigger's Crazy*, and it came around to the "Flying Saucers" routine. I'd forgotten all about it, and yet when it kicked in it meshed perfectly with what I've been trying to get across in this article—that mix of truth and laughter and attitude and pain. It's the perfect note to conclude on. Pryor starts out by imitating and making fun of white folks, who are amazed, frightened, and impressed when they see a flying saucer. In contrast: "Nothing can scare a nigger, after four hundred years of this shit. . . . The Martian ain't got a chance. A nigger'd warn a Martian, 'You better get your ass away from around here. You done landed on Mr. Gilmore's property.' Martian landed in New York the niggers'd take his shit from him. 'You got to give up the flying saucer baby.'"

Notes

1. The genre of African American science fiction is just beginning to be defined and explored. For a groundbreaking work on the subject, see Thomas 2000.

2. Definition of naturalism from *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), 2d ed.

3. James E. Gunn, introduction to *The Road to Science Fiction*, vol. 1, (New York: New English Library, 1977), quoted in Gökçe 2001.

4. Lerone Bennett, *The Negro Mood*, quoted in Henderson 1969, 115–16.

5. This brings to mind the scene in *Beverly Hills Cop* in which Eddie Murphy makes it past the protective executive secretary and into her boss's office by

pretending to be a deliveryman. "Floral delivery is my life," he says as he moves smoothly past her.

6. If you know of one, please let me know. You may reach me via e-mail at kali@kalital.com.

7. Martin Delany, *Blake*, quoted in Bryant 1997, 39.

8. American National Biography Database, www.library.pitt.edu/resources/database_info/anb. (30 June 2001).

9. E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1898), Bartleby.com, www.bartleby.com/81/8779.html (28 June 2001).

10. Williams mentions that Schuyler gave him a number of poor reviews for his books, and the two were deeply opposed politically.

11. For an excellent overview of women's roles in the civil rights and black power movements, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Random House, 1980). For a first-person detailed narrative detailing women's roles in the Black Panthers, see Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power* (New York: Anchor, 1994).

12. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, quoted in Bryant 1997, 237.

13. I am thinking, as I capitalize this term, of Langston Hughes's Simple stories, which illustrate the double-voiced nature of African American rhetoric.

14. Yet another protagonist whose name begins with a "B." It would be difficult, at this point, to make an argument for coincidence. This consistency supports the argument that the later authors of the novels under discussion saw themselves as part of a distinct and particular conversation within the African American literary tradition. Himes, whose lack of subtlety has been widely noted, simply declares what the "B" stands for: black.

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Tracie Morris

AfroFuture—Dystopic Unity

My first word was an error
according to the machine I spoke it in.
Whispering into an orifice used to be intimate,
Now, the Neural Network Noir twitters from every misplaced
exclamation. Deep spell check.

Not set, the rhythm hasn't been squeaked yet.
I was the first class to be spoon-fed the suspicious cereal.
"Look at the swirls" we said as the glucose crystals separated from the
genetic grains.

"Crunch-crunch-crunch" they marched through the esophagus,
the sarcophagi from us, rolling over.

The first time we dared to play the underground numbers straight and
they hit on the regular, when every time a someone dreamed of a black
cat and ran into one the next day, we thought those folks on the down
low we all know who shook them bones was finally coming up, with the
upper hand.

But then, the "git-cho-man-back" gooba wasn't happening.
(He disappeared.) We could feel the ooh's and aah's of the clients
getting done by the meth girls who were turned out to turn tricks.
That was more than we wanted to know.

In a covert bell curve moment, the lower than average intelligence
quotient of bleached D.C. allocated 20 mill, a buck a pop & mom, to
equalize Negroes with psychic self-correcting breakfast which would
allow their leaders to auto-repair the rest of us.

Above grounded, it was called the Contemporary Ancestral Pacifier, guaranteed to have all in your business. Coming out open folks called it getting a "cap through yo' ass."

(Leno quipped that we talked too much anyway and this would, at least, save us from all that yelling on the sub-way.)

It was all the Paleros and Iyalochas could do to stay out of the loop, much less help anyone else. Conversion was officially closed in those circles. You had to be in line to stay in line.
This was the concession allowed to stave off their complaints of attrition.

Vertical

A rainbowed sky is the fixed horizon
among the alleyways of light.
Recurring building towers have Quasimodo
humps, their spires, dowsing rods.

Lengthy, heavily boned people,
inhalers affixed like ornate Spanish
combs of flamenco Doñas,
tiptoe the panorama.

Terra vibratos,
spontaneity uneven — reactors
balloon and deflate their half-lives.
Degraded lungs of the world
at the ball's melting, melding center.

Under the rubble, under the graves
the ancient dead shake such angry fists.

The whole boiling, burning sea
has finally begun to smolder.

The dolphins, leaving land again,
search deeply for remaining whales.

Green is peeking out,
under garish day-glo
from useless things.

Manipulated animals, re-made
fawns with sharp teeth,
does with claws.

Goats consume tiny tastes of uranium. Convert
them to pebbles under foot, walk away.

Steroidal breasts drain
in women, milk
returning to lucidity.

The eagles come down from
stratospheric heights, carrying
their nests from clouds.

"Making the Impossible Possible"

AN INTERVIEW WITH NALO HOPKINSON

Alondra Nelson

Nalo Hopkinson is the critically acclaimed author of two novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), and the editor of an anthology of "Caribbean fabulist fiction," *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* (2000). A collection of Hopkinson's short stories, entitled *Skin Folk*, was published in the winter of 2001. In 1998 Hopkinson was the first recipient of the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest for new science fiction writers for *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Now in its fifth printing, the novel won the Locus Award for Best First Science Fiction Novel. Hopkinson received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1999 and has also been nominated for several other prestigious awards for writers of speculative fiction, including the Hugo Award, the Nebula Awards, the James R. Tiptree Jr. Award, and the Philip K. Dick Award.

The Jamaican-born Hopkinson resides in Toronto, Canada, and has also lived in Guyana and Trinidad. Drawing on Caribbean culture, especially that of Trinidad and Jamaica, her writing has introduced unique themes and archetypes into the generic conventions of science fiction. *Brown Girl in the Ring* is the story of Ti-Jeanne, a young mother living in near-future Toronto. Faced with life-threatening challenges, she turns to her grandmother Gros-Jeanne for help. A skilled Orisha priestess, Gros-Jeanne teaches her granddaughter the relevance and power of traditional spirituality for the modern world. In this tale, Hopkinson mixes Caribbean dialects, references to Derek Walcott's play *Ti-Jeanne and His Brothers*, and quotations from a popular Caribbean children's ring game (from which she borrows the novel's title) with more familiar science fiction conventions such as biotechnology and a postindustrial dystopic urban setting. *Midnight Robber* is similarly syncretic, infusing allusions to Haitian culture and references to Yoruba spirituality, Jamaican revolutionaries, and Trinidadian carnival into science fiction mainstays such as alternative dimensions and artificial intelligence. In this interview, Hopkinson discusses her truly original form of literary speculation.

This interview was conducted via e-mail during the summer of 2001.

Alondra Nelson: I've heard you describe your writing as speculative fiction. Why do you prefer this description of your work to having it defined

as science fiction, for example? How do you define speculative fiction and how did you come to write it?

Nalo Hopkinson: I don't know that I prefer speculative fiction (spec-fic) as a description. If I've said that, it would depend on who asked me the question and why. To those who insist that my writing isn't science fiction, I say, yes, it is. To those who insist that it isn't literature, I say, yes, it is. When I'm simply asked what I write, I use whatever definition I think the audience will either understand or be curious about. As to my definition of spec-fic, I describe it as a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations.

I write science fiction and fantasy (and some would say, horror) because that's what I read. Most of the fiction on my shelves is speculative or fantastical in some way, and always has been. As a young reader, mimetic fiction (fiction that mimics reality) left me feeling unsatisfied. The general message that I got from it was "life sucks, sometimes it's not too bad, but mostly people are mean to each other, then they die." But, rightly or wrongly, I felt as though I'd already figured that out. I felt that I didn't need to read fiction in order to experience it. But folktales and fables and the old epic tales (Homer's *Iliad*, for instance) felt as though they lived in a different dimension. It wasn't until later that I would learn words such as "archetype" and "metaphor" and begin to figure out what attracted me to Anansi stories and fantastical tales. As a child, I just vaguely knew that I wanted stories that transcended the quotidian "life sucks and then you die." Call it escapism, because at some level it is, but I think that goes back to human beings being tool-users. We imagine what we want from the world; then we try to find a way to make it happen. Escapism can be the first step to creating a new reality, whether it's a personal change in one's existence or a larger change in the world. For me, spec-fic is a contemporary literature that is performing that act of the imagination—as opposed to the old traditional folk, fairy, and epic allegorical tales, which I think of as historical literature of the imagination. And here I need to qualify, because all fiction is imaginative and much of it transcends the quotidian. I'm just trying to identify science fiction/fantasy/horror/magical realism as fiction that starts from the principle of making the impossible possible.

AN: Speculative fiction is an apt umbrella description of your work because it is a genre that, as you say, comprises other genres, including sci-fi, fantasy, fable, magic realism, and horror. Your writing seamlessly

interweaves the conventions of many of these subgenres. *Midnight Robber* contains elements of sci-fi (the omniscient neural network or internet that you call Granny Nanny), fantasy (Tan Tan takes up residence in a magical world of tree-dwellers), and horror (there is a sinister or melancholy tone to the story as well); while *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* is divided into themes that range from "Crick Crack" to "Science" and "Dreams." Is this alchemy of conventions common among other writers of genre fiction? Do you think that the anxiety to classify your work stems from this blending of themes and styles?

NH: Well, first I want to say that when people have said that there are elements of fantasy to *Midnight Robber* I've had to wrack my brains to think what those might be. I finally decided that it was the three "folk" tales that form the triple spine of the book. I wouldn't have said the beings in the tree; I tried to make them as scientifically plausible as I know how, which admittedly isn't much!

For all that I've been reading science fiction and other fantastical fiction since I was a child, I didn't grow up in a SF community. No such thing in the Caribbean. I began attending cons [science fiction conventions or community gatherings] regularly in 1996. I didn't know that there was an ideological debate between science fiction and fantasy until I was preparing to attend the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop at Michigan State University in 1995. That was when I figured out, from things my fellow students were saying, that there is and has been a bitter pitched battle between the two for decades.

I guess that fusion of the genres is characteristic of my writing if only because I'm not very good at remembering to tell the genres apart. But too, when my work is coming from a Caribbean context, fusion fits very well; that's how we survived. We can't worship Shango on pain of death? Well, whaddya know; he just became conflated with a Catholic saint. Got at least four languages operating on this one tiny island? Well, we'll just combine the four and call it Papiamento. Can't grow apples in the tropics for that apple pie? There's this vegetable called *chocho*, and it's approximately the right color and texture and pretty tasteless; add enough cinnamon, brown sugar, and nutmeg, and no one will know the difference. It's a sensibility that I'm quite familiar with and enamored of (and it's great for writing postapocalyptic cities). Other writers do do it, though; take Ian McDonald's *Terminal Café*, for instance. And people are still arguing over whether Karen Joy Fowler's *Sarah Canary* is a historical piece or a first contact story.

I do get wary of getting typecast. The Caribbean still has this allure in this part of the world of being an "exotic" tropical paradise, so the setting and the language in some of my stories seem to overshadow everything

else in some reviewers' eyes, and that's mostly what they talk about. One reviewer stated that *Midnight Robber* was light beachside reading, and I really wished I could ask him about what it was that he saw when he read the book. Not that I minded the review, which was positive in its own way, but I'm still struck sometimes by the difference between what I think I've written and what readers get from the text, and sometimes I'd like to know more. Every writer has to struggle with that. At a con a few months ago, a woman had all kinds of questions for me about things she hadn't quite followed in the book, although she'd enjoyed it. It was as much a learning experience for me as it was for her; I got a glimpse for a moment into how she had interpreted elements of the novel that I had meant to be understood quite differently.

In December 2001 my publisher released a collection of my short stories. When they showed me the cover that they wanted to use, I was very pleased, because it's gorgeous work. It shows a young black woman dressed in a loose white dress and head wrap that hints that she's going to some kind of Orisha ceremony. She's standing at night among the tall canes of a tropical sugar cane field. She's carrying a lit candle, and beside her at head height is a snake twined around one of the canes. After a few days of exulting over the cover, though, it struck me; most of the stories in the collection are set in Toronto! I had hoped it would have a cover that was sort of Michael Ray Charles meets cyberpunk. I pointed the Toronto settings out to my editor, and she said she realized that, but that my readers were used to the kind of cover image she had chosen and to the occasional dissonance between it and my content. It's odd. That kind of cover worked very well for *Midnight Robber* (and it was a chance to have a cover painted by the dynamic duo of Leo and Diane Dillon). We'll see what it does for *Skin Folk*.

AN: What type of extrapolation do the conventions of speculative fiction allow that is not allowed the realist or social realist fiction writer?

NH: If I were to write mimetic fiction, I'd be to some extent limited by what is known of the world. If my realist character were a young, straight, fat, middle-class woman living in North America, we can all pretty much guess at the types of struggles she might have around body image and developing as a sexual person. We could also probably come up with a similar list of ways in which she could try to resolve those problems. What would make the story unique are the particular events and texture of the life that would I imagine for that character.

However, in fantastical fiction, I can directly manipulate the metaphorical structure of the story. I can create a science fictional world in which relative fatness or slimness has about the same significance as eye

color, but only persons under five feet, five inches are considered beautiful. I can show people desperately trying not to grow taller and taking pills intended to cure them of the "disease" of tallness, which is considered to be epidemic in their society. I can show people who develop emotional disorders related to being tall. Another thing I might do is to create a fantastical world in which my fat protagonist magically becomes thinner in order that she can convince people to ignore her, so at the moment when she finally would be considered beautiful, she disappears. (Hey, maybe I should write that. No, too late now.)

In other words, one of the things I can do is to intervene in the readers' assumptions by creating a world in which standards are different. Or I can blatantly show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible.

AN: Writers of speculative fiction may create new metaphors, but the genre is nonetheless filled with characters who are thinly veiled metaphors for racial others—monsters and aliens, for example. How did you reconcile your affinity for the genre with its tacit racial politics?

NH: In part by writing from within the realities of racialized others. We will inhabit the future, but what will that future mean to us who have a history of being racialized? And we certainly inhabit a metaphorical landscape, but how do our histories and our experiences in the world lead us to paint that landscape? A friend recently took me to a landmark, a little stone pillar sunk into the ground at the waterfront of an American city. She said, "This marks the spot where this land was discovered." A little taken aback, I said, "You mean, it marks when the white people first came here?" She blinked and replied, "I guess, but we call them pioneers." Well, okay, but they aren't the discoverers of that land. They aren't its first pioneers by a long shot. It had already been discovered and inhabited centuries before. What would the story of that second discovery be if told from the eyes of the previous Native inhabitants? For that matter, never mind the white landing, what would the story of the first discovery be— the centuries when Native peoples were taking up residency on Turtle Island? That's an epic in itself, with its own tales of loves and hatreds and battles and treaties. So another strategy I have is to sometimes refuse to write yet another plea to the dominant culture for justice, and instead to simply set the story of the "othered" people front and center and talk about their (our) lives and their concerns.

I look at the publishing industry, and for a while it seemed that the way to get published and recognized as an important black author was to write

about the horrible things that happen to black people living in a system that despises us for our skin color. And I think it's vitally important to write about that. We need to continue writing about it; in fact that's one of the things that the novel that I'm currently writing is about. But if that's all that's getting published, I think I'm justified in suspecting that the industry was and is eroticizing black people as victims, as though that is our value to the world. However, now I'm also starting to see more "black" novels that write about the full lives of black people, everyday racism included.

AN: *Midnight Robber* begins with the poem "Stolen" by David Findlay, which repeats the phrase "I stole the torturer's tongue." How was this poem intended to reflect on the novel?

NH: I kind of hate telling people that I planned for them to think anything in particular in response to something I've written. For one thing, it's not nearly so calculated a process for me, because by writing, I'm often trying to work out what *I* think. For another, there will be a number of different interpretations to any piece of fiction, and that's part of the fun. Anyway, David wrote that song after he and I had been discussing *Midnight Robber* while it was in progress: what I was trying to do with it, particularly with language. I hoped that the song would give the reader a notion of some of the sensibility behind many creoles. But I may have been too subtle. It's incredible to me, but I'm slowly realizing that a lot of people don't know that Africans sold into the European slave trade were forced with extreme prejudice to take European names and to stop speaking their own languages, so those readers won't know that the resulting creoles are part enforced compliance, part defiance, and a whole lot of creativity. But I think that people will get *something* out of David's song, so I don't worry too much about it.

AN: One of the distinctive elements of your fiction—particularly in the context of spec-fic —is your use of creolized language. Earlier you mentioned Papiamento, the language derived from Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and African influences, that is primarily spoken in Aruba and Curaçao. Do you use this in your fiction? What other dialects do you use in your writing?

NH: No. I've only used creoles that an English speaker would understand. I mentioned Papiamento once in *Midnight Robber*; I made it one of the languages that people from my twin planets speak, because I didn't want to give them *Star Trek* syndrome, where alien worlds have only one culture and language. I've only heard Papiamento spoken once in my life, and it's a language I'd like to learn sometime. I also majored in Russian

and French and studied German for a year, so language is something with which I love to play.

The dialect I use most in my writing is Trinidadian, because that's what I speak the most handily. I can do a smattering of Jamaican, especially if I consult with my mother and grandmother, and I can throw in a word or two of Guyanese. *Midnight Robber* blends all three.

AN: How has your use of Caribbean-inflected language been received?

NH: Well, you know, to me it's not a new thing to write this way. Reclaiming oral speech patterns has been a growing practice among Caribbean writers for years, and also for writers from any country that is aware that it has a vernacular or two (and they all do, never mind the white Torontonian who once said to me, "*I* don't have an accent; *you* have an accent! I speak, like, normal, eh?"). So I was a little surprised to get so much surprise. But mostly it's been received quite well. Caribbean readers seem to like the blend of creoles that I did in *Midnight Robber*. Science fiction readers are generally up for a challenge, so most of them have waded into the language with a will and many have told me that they've had fun there. I recently received a fan letter from Japan, and that impressed the hell out of me because the gentleman had read *Midnight Robber* in the original. It hasn't been translated. My agent has warned me not to expect too many offers to translate it into other languages because of the hybrid creole in which it's written. I have a friend who thinks it would do well in Yiddish, and from what little I know of that language, I think he has an interesting notion there. The language I use in *Midnight Robber* is as much a sensibility thing as it is specific words, and Yiddish, near as I can tell, carries the historical sense of being the language of a people whose diasporic spread has at times been forced upon them, and it also, I think, has the sense of being a language "of the people."

AN: You distinguish your work from that of "traditional folk, fairy, and epic allegorical tales," which you describe as "historical literature of the imagination." And yet, though your novels and short stories are set in the time of the possible, your writing is filled with historical references, especially to Caribbean culture, and it is apparent that significant historical research goes into your fiction. How do you use history? How would you characterize the historical work of your novels? Are you using a different sense of history or the past than what is used in a fairy tale?

NH: How do I use history? I'm still figuring that out. Much of sci-fi draws on European history and folklore, to the extent that simply to mention a name—Oedipus, for instance—calls up a wealth of associations without

the author needing to say another word. It's like the black actor Paul Winfield playing an alien in "Darmok" (an episode from the fifth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*). He declaims, "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra," and everyone from his culture knows the tale he's referring to and the parallels he wants to draw to his current situation. The humans, however, are just baffled. They don't know the lore of that culture. If I wrote, "Nanny with her cheeks clenched," only a few people would have any clue who or what I was talking about. So I find myself having to first describe the Caribbean history or the folktale, then create my metaphors once I've done my info-dumping.

It's difficult to do that in a short story. I'm still devising ways. I can only have so many history teachers, graduate students specializing in folklore, librarians or folktale-spouting grandads conveniently show up to tell the audience what they need to know. I have a story that's stalled right now, and I think that's partly why. In a novel it's a little easier, because you can put in a tiny bit of info-dump at a time over the course of the whole novel, and your readers will slowly piece together what you're trying to tell them.

AN: Critics have hailed you as the heir apparent to a black science fiction tradition most often associated with the work of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez. Recently, two important works have been published that extend the timeline of black speculative writing, expand its lineage and enlarge its geographic scope. Sheree Renee Thomas's edited collection *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, in which your work is featured, includes the early-twentieth-century work of W. E. B. DuBois and George Schuyler, thinkers who have rarely been characterized as writers of speculative fiction and whose work is understood as far afield as that of, say, Delany or Butler. Your edited collection, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, contains the writing of noted Caribbean novelists Kamau Brathwaite and Jamaica Kincaid, who are probably little known among avid readers of sci-fi or fantasy. How would you describe this moment in black speculative writing? Is it the advent of a new wave of black science fiction, simply the emergence of new categories for African diasporic fiction, or the extension of an extant tradition?

NH: Danged if I know. I'd like to think that it's all three. A wave comes from a source, and for it to exist, there's gotta be people to dub it a wave. I definitely want to see more spec-fic being published by black writers, so whatever it is that's happening, I hope that it continues and strengthens. One of the many things I like about Sheree's anthology is that by printing new fiction alongside reprints of over a century ago, she's proving that

we're here, and we've been here awhile. For myself, what I was trying to do with my anthology is to reveal that hybrid place where magical realism (an "othering" term in itself, since it's so often used to refer to and exoticize fantastical fiction by hot country peoples), genre science fiction, and fantasy coexist. The book hasn't made as big a splash as *Dark Matter*, but so far, readers of both literary and speculative fiction seem to be quite happy to be plunged into that zone of shifting paradigms.

Having an anthology of writing by Caribbean people also allowed me to complicate an idea I encounter in the north: that "Caribbean" equals "black." I hope to see more and more writing by people of color. An anthology or two written solely by people of color would be nice. I can think of all kinds of things that would be nice, but I'm very wary of ghettoizing us all over again, of putting us in a place where the mainstream can say, "we don't need to publish that work, because they have their own vehicles." Or, "well, we already have one story by a person of color, so they're already represented and therefore we couldn't possibly publish a second." Someone recently said to a panel of black sci-fi writers, "But if there get to be too many of you, you'll become too common." I don't want to be a talking dog act. I don't want our value to be in how uncommon we are. That's a good strategy for keeping us on the outside and our numbers limited. I'd like to see people of color represented in strength at all levels of the industry: more editors, more publishers, more design people, more marketing people, more graphic novelists, more comic book artists. I'd like it to become perfectly commonplace that the instructors at spec-fic writing workshops are 30 to 50 percent people of color (and representation just as strong of working-class writers, queer writers, disabled writers, older writers, non-American writers; luckily, all these things overlap). The possibilities for imaginative fiction as a world literature are endless, but I think that the spec-fic industry is at this point limited in how it thinks about it.

Recently, a group of us have started to come up with ways to foster the development and the visibility of spec-fic by writers of color (www. carlbrandon.org). We are a tiny, scattered group of people at the moment, so we're only able to take baby steps as an organization, but perhaps it will grow. I hope so.

AN: Who is Carl Brandon? What type of activities does the Carl Brandon Society do? Are all of the members writers?

NH: Carl Brandon was the first black fan to make a name for himself in the science fiction community. Carl Brandon didn't exist. He was the fictional creation of white writer Terry Carr, who was in part responding to someone's racist comment that black people had no place in the science

> *I'd like to see people of color represented in strength at all levels of the industry: more editors, more publishers, more design people, more marketing people, more graphic novelists, more comic book artists. The possibilities for imaginative fiction as a world literature are endless.*

fiction community. Terry created Carl Brandon as a nom de plume, and Carl proceeded to become very active in the fan community, producing a fair bit of writing about events in the community. A lot of people came to think of Carl as a friend, and it was a bit of a traumatic event in science fiction fandom when the hoax was revealed.

Three years ago, a bunch of people, most of us people of color, met at Wiscon (the annual gathering of the feminist science fiction community) to begin to discuss how to raise the profile of people of color in the sci-fi community. The Carl Brandon Society was born out of that. We have no official membership criteria; anyone can volunteer. But we do have a steering committee that is and will continue to be comprised largely of people of color. That steering committee includes fans, writers, editors, and scholars. We chose the name Carl Brandon partly in tribute to Terry for raising the issue of race in sci-fi fandom. Partly it was a sense of irony, too, a wry awareness that the first acknowledged black fan in the community was a true invisible man, more à la Ralph Ellison than H. G. Wells. Partly it's an homage to Wiscon and the feminist sci-fi community, which provided us a meeting place, making a point of continuing to program panels on issues of race, and which has funded the photocopying costs that allow us to distribute our annual bibliographies of writing by sci-fi authors of color every year to the hundreds of Wiscon attendees. It's an homage because of James R. Tiptree Jr., another famous sci-fi hoax; a woman writer (Alice Sheldon) who masqueraded as a man for years in order to get her work published.

As to what types of activities we do, not very much yet. We are a handful of people, we're spread out all over the globe, and when we do manage to meet, it's only once a year at Wiscon for an hour or two. So far, we've managed to get a Web site under construction, and we've begun, as I've said, creating and distributing an annual list of sci-fi and related non-fiction published by writers of color in the previous year. Individual members have facilitated panels on issues of race at various sci-fi conventions in the United States. We have a free listserv going (called carlbrandon) at www.yahoogroups.com. We hope at some point to sponsor an award, but we have no funding and little infrastructure yet. It will take time. We have to build a groundswell of support and enthusiam first.

AN: How would you describe a con to someone who has never attended one? How did you learn of the first con that you attended?

NH: The first one was in 1982, in my first year of university. It was a small con organized by the science fiction club that I used to attend in the Canadian high school from which I'd just graduated. I knew nothing of

cons, and despite having attended the sci-fi club for a year (that's how long I attended high school in Canada), I knew and understood nothing of sci-fi community. But I was a new immigrant to Canada, so sci-fi community seemed no more strange than Canada and Canadians themselves did. Anyway, they organized this con in a Toronto hotel. I remember that the guests of honor were C. J. Cherryh (who, fifteen years later, would be the final judge for the first Warner Aspect First Novel Contest, which launched my career as a novelist when I won it. Of course, Cherryh didn't remember meeting me, and I myself didn't even make the connection until my novel had already been published. We had a brief and pleasant e-mail chat about it a few years ago) and John Norman, who writes the infamous "Gor" novels (Old World sword-and-sorcery set on an alternate, magical, preindustrial Earth where women are the sexual slaves of men). What an odd combination of guests; I can understand that now that I know a little bit more about both authors. I wonder what their conversations with each other were like.

Back then, all I remember was that C. J. Cherryh had stunning blue eyes, beautifully contrasted by curly black hair (blue eyes are one of those novelties for me; in the Caribbean, they're in the minority) and that John Norman wore a dark-colored suit the whole weekend and was quiet, unassuming, and extraordinarily polite. I remember that the other members of the SF club encouraged me to wear a costume. I loved the notion, because I'd never played mas' [masquerade] at Carnival time in Trinidad; I'd jumped up in the streets as tens of thousands do, but I'd never been part of a costumed band. And I'd only ever had one opportunity to celebrate Halloween, and that was at six years old when we were living in Connecticut while my father was at Yale University on a graduate theater scholarship. (I guess I should clarify that Halloween is not celebrated in the Caribbean.) So I tried to figure out what costume to wear. This was before Arnold Schwarzenegger had made the first *Conan* movie with Grace Jones playing a barbarian. This was way before Tina Turner as Auntie Entitie in *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* and Grace Jones again in the campy vampire film *Vamp*. Not that it's changed at all nowadays, but I think my only models then for black women masquerading the future or the fantastical were the Trinidadian mas' bands, which I didn't think would translate to this solo northern medium, and the amazing costumes of the 1970s funk group "LaBelle" with Patti Labelle, and the divine Tina Turner as the Acid Queen in the film *Tommy*. Oh, and of course, Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura in *Star Trek*, old school. And I sure as hell couldn't think of anyone black in the literature who would be so recognizable that I could dress like her and people would know who I was masked as.

So began one of my first lessons on blackness in sci-fi and fantasy. Who as a black woman could I be who would be recognizable to people at the con? Too dark (I thought) to have the proper pallor for a vampire, too thick-thewed (I thought) to be a fairy, so even the generic tropes of the genre wouldn't serve me. I suspected they wouldn't recognize anyone from LaBelle or the Acid Queen (and I was probably too conservative then to have had the nerve to play the Acid Queen), so I chose Lt. Uhura. Watched a lot of *Star Trek* (which I always did anyway) and made myself a *Star Trek* uniform out of red polyester and gold braid. I couldn't quite figure out the insignia they wore but while browsing at Bakka Books, Toronto's science fiction bookstore, I discovered to my amazement that there were whole manuals devoted to nothing but schematics of every aspect of *Star Trek*, from the layout of the Enterprise to the various officers' costumes. I didn't know whether I was appalled or relieved to discover that the too-brief-for-dignity dresses of the female officers came with matching red panties, so that even if you inadvertently flashed a glimpse of crotch while falling all over the ship as it lurched in the progress of a battle with the Romulans, at least what you were flashing would still be in uniform.

I couldn't afford a *Star Trek* manual (and didn't really want it; typically for me, I was more interested in the story aspect of *Star Trek*), so I memorized the insignia and used the embroidery function on my sewing machine to make myself a copy of it. I don't think I made the red panties. I think I made the skirt of my costume a little longer than regulation so that if I revealed my bottom, it would at least be by choice. Wore my costume to the con with my shiny black high-heeled boots and styled my (then) straightened hair into the famous Lt. Uhura bob. Years later when I gave my partner a picture taken of me in that costume to put up on my Web site (www.sff.net/people/nalo/), he misread the bob as a flattened Afro, and Photoshopped it back up to what he thought its spherical glory had been. When I told him that in fact I'd had straightened hair, he was incredulous. It so doesn't jibe with his image of me that he couldn't bring himself to correct what he'd done. So the image of me as Lt. Uhura on my Web site shows me (and by extension, her) in full, Afrocentric, Angela Davis black power mode. Which is fantasy of the first water, I guess. The character of Lt. Uhura actually devolved politically from the full participating role that Gene Roddenberry had originally envisioned to that of intergalactic receptionist. I gather that there had been hate letters to *Star Trek* for even having a black character in a permanent role, and the producers became nervous and made Roddenberry write smaller and smaller roles for her. Nichols herself only stayed with the show because none other than Martin Luther King asked her to; told her that she gave black people in America a vision of themselves having a future.

Alondra Nelson

How would I describe a con? Well, I generally don't attend the costume cons or the media cons unless I've been specifically invited to them. As always, I'm more interested in the book side of things. I think I'd have to describe what's common to them all, which is science fiction community. And frankly, though I can sometimes find some of the ways of the community vexing and strange, I'm still blown away by a literature that has a following so strong that the readership voluntarily organizes conventions where writers, readers, gamers, costumers, actors, critics, and the occasional scholar can meet, hang out, and play. I could probably attend a con every weekend of the year on this continent. This wouldn't happen if I were writing purely mimetic literary fiction.

It's a very strange and very specialized environment, but out of that comes a strong sense of community, and I value that. I also value that the community is made up of the folks like me who were the weirdos in school, who couldn't figure out why lipstick could only be some shade of red, or why a relationship was supposed to happen between only two people, or why men weren't supposed to wear lace miniskirts. There's probably no "alternative" lifestyle that's unfamiliar to sci-fi community, and that makes it one community (I have many communities, some of which often don't intersect much at all) in which I can feel at home in certain aspects of my outlook on life. One thing for which I long is many, many more black and brown and yellow and red faces, and there are a few of us trying to make that happen.

Sci-fi community is very liberal (and there's a bit of an irony to a Canadian—and a Caribbean, for that matter—saying that about Americans, because we don't have the American fear of socialism, so to us with our three-and-more party systems, "liberal" is middle-of-the-road, leaning to the Right). Generally the feeling in sci-fi community is that everyone should be welcome, and that racial differences shouldn't matter. It's an excellent beginning, but in practice what it tends to mean is that someone who brings up the issue of the inequities of race can make people uncomfortable and as a result can be seen to *be* the problem. It's a weird twist that can turn the people who are being racialized into the racist ones for daring to mention that there is not an even playing field. That kind of prejudice is not ubiquitous in sci-fi community, but I'd say that it's pervasive enough that it can make sci-fi community a less welcoming place than it would like to be. I know that a lot of the people of color in the field notice it; we talk about it.

AN: One of your contributions to *Dark Matter* is a short story entitled "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" about a heterosexual couple experimenting with a hi-tech bodysuit that heightens sexual pleasure. Did Samuel Delany's fiction writing—*Dhalgren* and the Neveryon tales, for example—

influence your decision to write about sex and sexuality? Do you plan to continue creating fiction that blurs the line between the erotic and the fantastical?

NH: When I read Delany's novel *Dhalgren* at about twenty-two years old, it blew my brain apart and reassembled the bits. That man hacked my mind. When I later read his autobiographical work *The Motion of Light in Water*, and began to learn something about the experience that had gone into making the man, I sort of fell in love. It hadn't occurred to me that one could write science fiction and fantasy as metafiction about the process of creating story. At the time, I didn't even have the words to explain or even understand what he was doing; all I could do was to be swept away. I didn't realize that you could use science fiction and fantasy to talk frankly and personally about the sexual and other lives of marginalized people. I suspect, though my memory may be faulty, that his work and James Baldwin's were the first fiction that I read that incorporated sexual acts between queer men, and I think that when I was reading the Baldwin, I was too young to know what a big deal that was—probably didn't even understand the sex scenes. If my memory is correct, then I'm blessed that that reading experience came to me from two *black* men, because queer black men's lives still feel like a mostly silenced topic in the world. A local Toronto paper just published an "exposé" in which they seem to be claiming that what gay black men want is to be closeted, which of course ignores the input of all the outspoken brothers out there.

What was your question again? Oh, right; yes, I would say that Chip was one of the first people from whose work and life I drew courage when I began to write about sex and sexuality. Writing by people such as Carol Queen and Susie Bright and Elizabeth Lynn also helped, and the collection *Pomosexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel, and *Transgender Warriors*, by Leslie Feinberg, and *Beneath the Skins: The New Spirit and Politics of the Kink Community*, by Ivo Dominguez Jr., and the seriously rude, black gay S&M comics of Belasco, and one of bell hooks's autobiographies, where she talks about trying to negotiate a polyamorous relationship with her partner, and postings by people such as Juba Kalamka and Ayizé Jama-Everett on your own AfroFuturism listserv, and the efforts of erotica publisher and sci-fi/fantasy writer Mary Anne Mohanraj, and of erotic sci-fi/fantasy publisher and writer Cecilia Tan, and writing by bisexual black theologian Eliahou Farajaje-Jones.

In other words, I've been systematically gathering about myself the thoughts on sex and sexuality of a bunch of freaky women, transfolks, and people of color: the people who like me might think that green is a perfectly good color for lipstick, and that five people in a relationship can be

a good idea, and that gender ambiguity can be hot. When I was a misfit girl living uncomfortably in a highly normalized world, science fiction and fantasy were the first literatures I read that wrestled head-on with normativity, a way of being in the world that works for me in some arenas and flat out makes me suicidal in others. Who knew that the fictions that sometimes gave me reason to remain alive were lived experience for many very real people?

Damn, I've strayed away from your question again. Yes, I probably will continue to write about sex, and I'll probably continue to try to write about it in a way that explores the edges. The man and woman in "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" are a heterosexual black couple having "het" (and, I like to think, hot) sex, but they've nevertheless wandered into some gender play: something that neither one of them addresses directly in the story, and that isn't even really central to their dealings with each other, but that indirectly helps to force out some issues in their relationship that they haven't been dealing with very well. That story is about to be republished in *The Year's Best Erotica*, by Susie Bright. I was unimaginably thrilled to be receiving communication from Susie Bright, asking if she might publish one of my stories. One of the utterly cool things about writing is that it has helped me meet some of the people who've been formative to me.

My short story collection, *Skin Folk*, contains a story that is the first one I've ever written deliberately as erotica. I do fret a lot about how those elements of my work will be received by the more conservative people in my communities, but the alternative would be to try to chop bits of myself off again in order to be acceptable. As I get older, I find it harder to keep doing that type of self-mutilation. I very much fear being attacked by people about whom I care who don't like what I'm doing, but the fear isn't silencing me very effectively any more. It helps when I'm in the grip of the fear to know that there are people who've been walking this road ahead of me. It helps that there are Chip Delanys in this world.

AN: How did you learn about the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop?

NH: I think I was sixteen years old when I first heard about it. I was living in Georgetown, Guyana, at the time. I'd read all the science fiction and fantasy in the local public library and was jonesing for more. I complained about it to a friend of my aunt's, a black man, and he lent me some of his precious collection of sci-fi novels on condition that I return them to him. One of them was a collection of Clarion stories that talked about the Clarion experience. I can't remember, but I fear that I may not have returned his books to him after all, because I still have that one, at least. In that self-absorbed way that young people can have, I knew his face and I knew that

he was a family friend, but I wasn't too clear on his name, and I didn't know how to contact him. And, of course, it didn't occur to me to ask my aunt. Anyway, when I read the description of Clarion and what goes on there, I longed to attend myself. But I wasn't a writer. Didn't think I could be a writer. But the longing never went away.

I was a student at Clarion in 1995. Clarion is a six-week graduate-level workshop for writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror. You're accepted on the basis of some samples of your writing. Every week there is a different writer in residence who leads the workshop sessions and lectures on some aspect of the field. It's an exhausting, all-consuming experience. I loved it.

AN: Having returned to Clarion as an instructor this summer, do you have a sense that the alternative perspectives and stylistic fusion that you and other writers have brought to speculative fiction have influenced younger writers? Did the schism between sci-fi and fantasy exist among students as it had when you were at Clarion in 1995?

NH: Yes, there's still an ideological battle between sci-fi and fantasy. That feels to me like one of those sibling battles that rages for years, perhaps lifetimes. It's a battle that gives us a perverse kind of pleasure, and it'll be around awhile. And writers have been effectively fusing science fiction and fantasy way before I tried it—and many of them way better. In fact, I'd say that they only split when they became marketing categories. Case in point: as with my novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Emma Bull's excellent novel *Bone Dance* fuses Orisha beliefs with a science fictional future in a broken-down city, and hers was published years before mine. At Clarions East and West in 2001, there was a multitude of approaches to storytelling in the group, and a few people were quite upfront about working to create some kind of fusion between their cultural traditions of storytelling and the narratives of science fiction and fantasy. I suspect some of that is the influence of more senior writers, and some of it comes directly out of the interests, experiences, and sensibilities of those emerging writers them-selves.

AN: Students of Clarion workshops are expected to forge the future direction of sci-fi and fantastical fiction. Reflecting on your experience as an instructor at a recent workshop, what does the future of speculative fiction hold?

NH: What does the future of speculative fiction hold? I have no clue. Despite the reputation that science fiction writers have, speculative fiction is really not about predicting the future. That strikes me as an oddly bor-ing enterprise; the real future is always so much more absorbing and com-

plex than anything we can imagine. What I would *hope* will begin to happen in SF/F/H is that, in the same way that women writers and readers are claiming a place in the fantastical genres, there will begin to be more diverse expressions of people's lived experiences of race, culture, class, sexuality, social structures, and gender, and that more of those expressions will begin to come from outside the United States.

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Tana Hargest

Chairwoman's Letter

Tana Hargest
Chairwoman of the Board
and Chief Executive Officer
12 June 2002

To Our Potential Shareholders:

For Bitter Nigger Inc. and our investors, 2001 proved to be an extraordinary year. We expanded our cultural intervention mission in three exciting areas: Bitter Nigger Pharmaceutical, Bitter Nigger Product Division, and the Bitter Nigger Broadcast Network.

Much of Bitter Nigger Inc.'s success is attributable to our increased focus on doing what we do best—discovering, developing, and bringing to market innovative cultural interventions to save, protect, and enhance lives. Since I became CEO in 1997, we have divested all of our non-cultural intervention businesses, including in 1998 all of the businesses that had been part of our Art Career/Art Star Group. Despite these divestitures, in the last eight months Bitter Nigger's ideas have doubled, viewer investment in Bitter Nigger Inc. has more than tripled, and the value of our relevancy stock has grown eightfold.

We created Bitter Nigger to fill the void in the contemporary art market. Bitter Nigger provides fresh ideas in the arena of political art and illustrates the shifting possibilities of contemporary cultural production. Through our packaging of concepts as consumable products we have increased the relevancy of art for viewers beyond the art world.

The road we have mapped out for ourselves is exciting. With careful planning and a focus on creativity, we endeavor to deliver the highest-quality cultural interventions available.

If you have any further questions or would like a copy of the Bitter Nigger Inc. annual report, please feel free to contact our director of public relations at 212-245-2508.

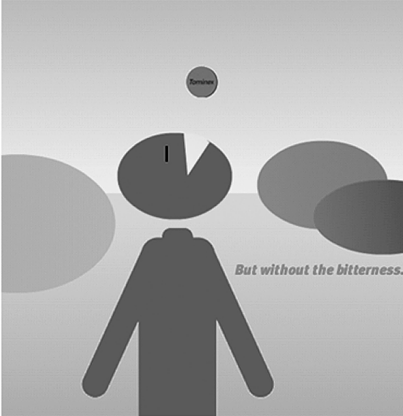Tana Hargest
Chairwoman and Chief Executive Officer
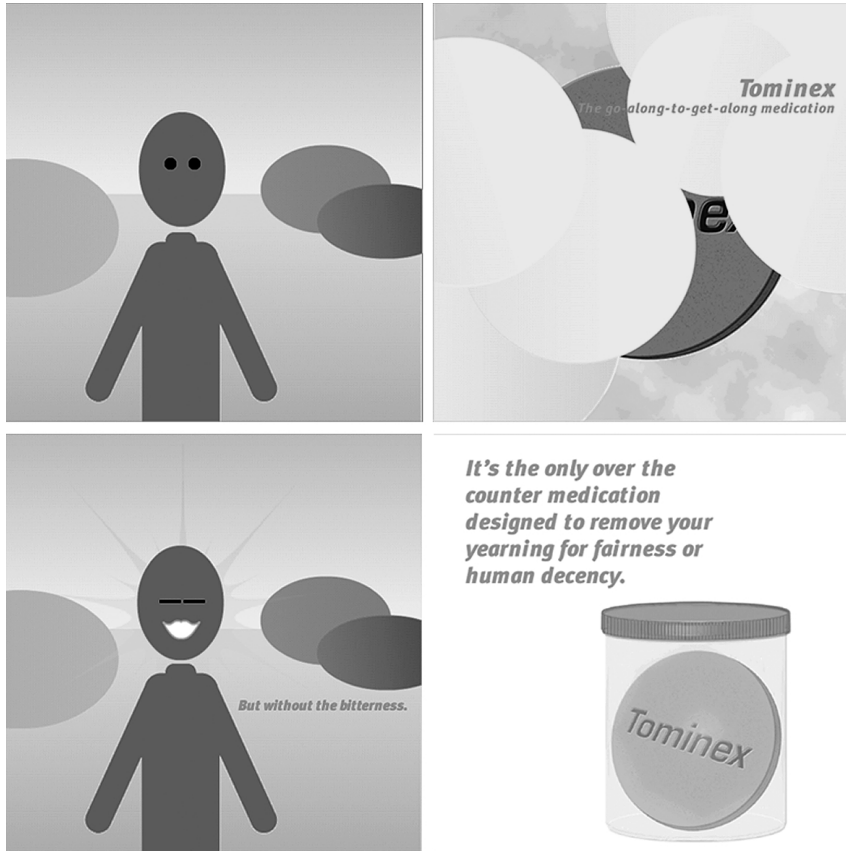
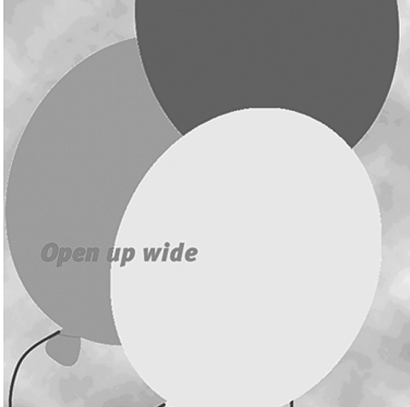Eight frames from *Tominex*. Bitter Nigger Inc., 2001

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Four frames from *The Enforcer*. Bitter Nigger Inc., 2001

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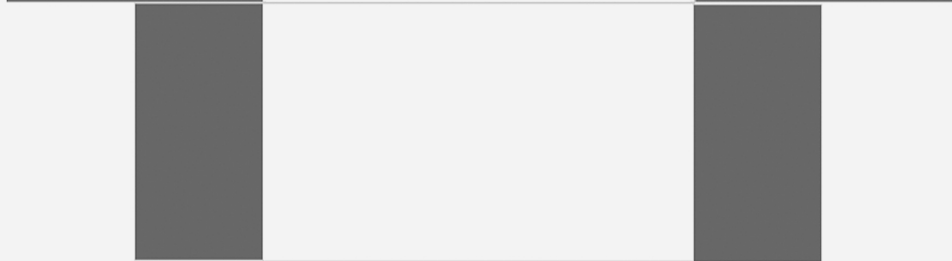
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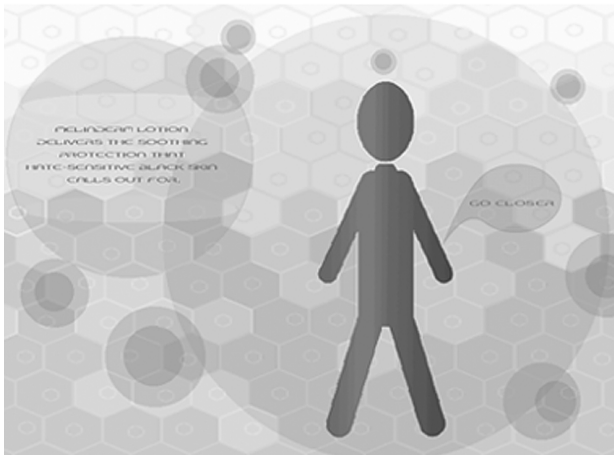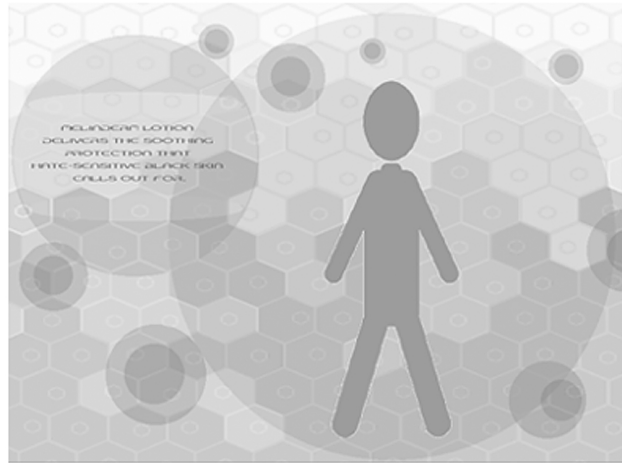
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The Revolution Will Be Digitized

AFROCENTRICITY AND THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Anna Everett

Introductions sketch the discursive framework for what follows, and what follows immediately are prefatory remarks that speak to my ambivalence about the evolution of digital culture and race. The focus of this project is on early instances of African diasporic engagements with cyberspace. I begin by acknowledging my ambivalence about the rhetorical terms of the nascent technocratic order, an ambivalence that seems justified each time I boot up my personal computer to compile my years of research into this topic. In powering up my PC, I am confronted with DOS-based text that gives me pause. Before access to the MMX technology powering my system is granted, I am alerted to this opening textual encoding: "Pri. Master Disk, Pri. Slave Disk, Sec. Master, Sec. Slave." Programmed here is a virtual hierarchy organizing my computer's software operations. Given the nature of my subject matter, it might not be surprising that I am perpetually taken aback by the programmed boot-up language informing me that my access to the cyber frontier indeed is predicated upon a digitally configured "master/slave" relationship. As the on-screen text runs through its remaining string of required boot-up language and codes, I often wonder why programmers chose such signifiers that hark back to our nation's ignominious past. I doubt that the Hegelian master/slave dialectic is the referent to which these programmers allude. Even though I do not assume a racial affront or intentionality in this peculiar deployment of the slave and master coupling, its appearance each time I turn on my computer nonetheless causes me concern.

Historicizing African Diasporic Consciousness

African diasporic consciousness originated in the darkened abyss below the decks of European ships during the infamous middle passage of the transatlantic slave trade. Severed from the familiar terrain of their homelands and dispatched to the overcrowded bowels of slave vessels, the abducted Africans forged out of necessity a virtual community of intercultural kinship structures and new languages in which to express them. During the first half of the twentieth century, African diasporic scholar-activists W. E. B. DuBois and C. L. R. James argued that these historical

events created the preconditions for Africans in the New World to be among the first people to experience modernity. In 1969 James asserted that:

> The vast change in human society came from the slave trade and slavery. All the historians tell you that. . . . It was slavery that built up the bourgeois society and enabled it to make what Lévi Strauss [*sic*] thinks is the only fundamental change in ten thousand years of human history. The blacks not only provided the wealth in the struggle, which began between the old [aristocratic] society and the new bourgeois society; the black people were foremost in the struggle itself. (James 1992, 396)

Other contemporary theorists, such as Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, echo James and DuBois's positions to elaborate that the transatlantic African diasporic consciousness of African Americans, African Caribbeans, black Britons, and others is directly attributable to the post-Enlightenment demands of a modernity that followed the invasion of the European body snatchers into Africa seeking black bodies to power the impending industrial revolution. Despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations. The formation of these new African-inflected communications strategies enabled this heterogeneous mass of people somehow to overcome their profound dislocation, fragmentation, alienation, relocation, and ultimate commodification in the Western slavocracies of the modern world.

This brief overview is necessary to contextualize the ideological primacy and the historical development of an African diasporic consciousness in oppressed New World Africans whose decolonizing movements and struggles ushered in what is termed the postcolonial era. Many, including this writer, are not convinced that colonization is over. For us, the socioeconomic institution has morphed effectively into the thriving new global oligopolies of our post–Cold War, postmodern era. The point here is that without such an overview and context, it becomes a near impossibility to understand and fully account for the historical and epochal shifts as well as mutabilities in the ideology of African diasporic consciousness motivating the black nationalist ethos spanning the nineteenth-century African colonization societies on through the twentieth-century black nationalist or Afrocentric movements of the 1960s to the present day.

This essay distills some key findings of my larger study that considers the persistence of African diasporic consciousness in cyberspace and the

digital age. Among the areas of concern here are the often overlooked or unacknowledged fact of historical and contemporary black technolust and early technology adoption and mastery. Additionally, this work theorizes African diasporic issues vis-à-vis the discourse of the superinformation highway, digital media technologies' impact in the areas of education and politics, and questions of race and representation in new technologies, such as the Internet.

Toward a Theory of the Egalitarian Technosphere; or, How Wide Is the Digital Divide?

> In the early 1970s, a new communications network began to take off in America. . . . Visionaries saw it unleashing creativity and opening the door to an egalitarian future. It was CB Radio. By 1980 it was almost dead; it had collapsed under the weight of its own popularity, its channels drowned under a sea of noise and chaos. Could the Internet go the same way?
> —Christopher Anderson

Since the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, home pages, listservs and electronic directories on the Internet and the World Wide Web that are specifically targeted at African and African diasporic net users. My studies of the African diasporic presence on-line suggest that 1995 is a watershed moment in the transformation of the Internet from a predominately elite, white masculinist domain to a more egalitarian public sphere. Although there are a number of African American early adopters who infiltrated this would-be gated cyber community prior to this benchmark, black connectivity on-line seems to have achieved a critical mass in 1995 when the Yahoo search engine initiated a separate category for Afrocentric content on the World Wide Web.[1]

Significantly, the separate category for Afrocentric content on the Yahoo site coincided with a more general growth in the massification of the World Wide Web. In his study of the Internet for the *Economist* magazine, Christopher Anderson (1995) gives an indication of the magnitude of its unprecedented growth. His estimation of the World Wide Web's massive expansion is particularly revealing. Anderson notes that the Internet had doubled in size since 1988. "At the same time," he observed, "the Web grew almost twenty-fold; in just eighteen months users created more than three million multimedia pages of information, entertainment and advertising" (3). Although he concedes that exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, he calculates that at least twenty million "users" were on-line as early as October 1994. If we accept his evocation of Moore's

Law, a phenomenon named after Gordon Moore, founder of the Intel Corporation, "which says that computing power and capacity double every eighteen months" (4), then the unwieldy nature of any attempt to survey the contents of the Internet after 1995 is apparent.

The difficulty of delimiting what I am calling the cybertext (cyberspace as a textual object of study) for analytical purposes in many ways replicates problems encountered by early analysts in their formulation of a critical hermeneutics of television. Like television, the dynamic and fluid nature of the Internet makes it "too big and too baggy to be easily or quickly explained. No single approach is sufficient to deal with it adequately" (Newcomb 1987, ix). With this in mind, I have opted to frame my own findings on the African diasporic niche within the Internet in terms of a snapshot or moment-in-time approach so that some useful perspective on this difficult moving target of analysis might emerge.

In the years since I began this brief history of a new media technology in a state of becoming, I have discovered some important and quite intriguing methodological and theoretical problems. My previous research on early-twentieth-century black print publications did not prepare me for the hyperephemerality of the cybertext. What this means is that conducting Internet content analysis presents its own set of problematics involving access to and availability of the material under scrutiny. The fleeting nature or short shelf life of most individual, grassroots, and private nonprofit Web sites necessitates the immediate downloading of those sites that might be considered worthy of study because, as I have learned the hard way, to attempt a second page or site view may not be possible. Too many of these sites disappear without a trace, or they are upgraded to the point of unrecognizability. These are the challenges of conducting what Michel Foucault might consider a history of the present.

Forging a Digital Black Public Sphere

The Internet was definitely a factor in helping to get the word out to Sisters about the [Million Woman] March. From August 10 1997 until 12:01 AM, October 25 1997, the official web site took 1,010,000 hits from around the world. . . . This doesn't take into account the number of hits or e-mail at the regional MWM Web Sites across the country.
—Ken Anderson, march Web master

Historically . . . nothing might seem less realistic, attractive or believable to black Americans than the notion of a black public sphere. . . . [Blacks] are drawn to the possibilities of structurally and effectively transforming the

founding notion of the bourgeois public into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning.
—Houston A. Baker Jr.

[T]he contemporary black public sphere is partly the creature of the political economy of a global, advanced capitalist order, but in the past it has offered—and may yet again offer—a space for critique and transformation of that order. If not, then all this is only idle talk.
—Thomas C. Holt

As I watched in amazement the incalculable stream of orderly black female bodies (and their supportive male counterparts) that swelled the streets of Philadelphia on 25 October 1997, my overwhelming feelings of jubilation, incredulity, pride, and optimism soon gave way to fear, concern, and pessimism. Driving my ambivalence about even the scant network and cable TV news broadcasts of the phenomenally successful Million Woman March was my understanding of how televised coverage of the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath in the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to a national backlash against African American aspirations for social, political, economic, and educational equity from the 1970s to the present. California voters' more recent approval of several anti–affirmative action propositions, including #209 (the anti–affirmative action measure), #187 (the anti-immigration ruling), and the 1999 passage of a juvenile justice initiative that sentences minor offenders as adults, are legacies of this history. Moreover, today's precipitous and steady decline in African American and other racial minority students' enrollments at prestigious universities nationwide clearly attests to the regressive consequences of the legal deinstitutionalization of these underrepresented groups' access to elite higher education in the nation since the 1978 University of California *Regents v. Bakke* decision.[2]

Despite this recent history's profound influence on today's racial and political economies, the role of the Internet in the undeniable success of the Million Women March may allay, for the moment at least, fears that the nascent technocratic order will automatically exclude the marginalized black masses from the still-evolving information infrastructure. In fact, my project of tracking and analyzing black homesteading on the electronic frontier, to borrow an apt phrase from Howard Rheingold, is optimistic in its suggestions for the democratizing potential of the Internet, especially given its demonstrably pivotal role in mobilizing a throng of grassroots activists in the 1997 Million Woman March on Philadelphia.

In his 1993 book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rheingold observed that "computer-mediated communi-

cations" technologies owe their phenomenal growth and development to networking capabilities that enable people "to build social relationships across barriers of space and time" (7). It is specifically to this point of spatial and temporal ruptures produced by recent technological advances that the present study of the Internet as a promising site for the establishment of an egalitarian technosphere is initially directed. First, it is useful to emphasize an important lesson embedded in Rheingold's ethnographic informant account of the "computer-mediated social groups" he has dubbed "virtual communities" (1). Of the myriad ways that grassroots groups adapted the inchoate Internet technology "designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different communication needs" (7), none is more symptomatic of technology's overall elasticity and unpredictability than the rapid and unanticipated growth of the "Internet Relay Chat (IRC)" phenomenon among non–computer experts. Rheingold sees the lure of the IRC as being inextricably bound up with its recombinant nature[3] as an interactive medium that conjoins "the features of conversation and writing" (3). Second, this technological hybridization of speech or orality (conversation) and literacy (writing), which privileges neither, not only furthers the Derridian project of negating epistemological exaltations of logocentrism (privileging speech) over techne (writing),[4] it also suggests a parallel or affinity to various traditions of black technocultural syncretisms. For example, much has been written about black appropriation and mastery of Western musical technologies and instruments to craft and express such uniquely black musical idioms as jazz and the blues.[5] As Bruce R. Powers puts it in *The Global Village*, "unlikely combinations produce discovery" (McLuhan and Powers 1989, ix). Thus the seamless combination of conversational strategies and writing on the proliferating IRC channels has produced for both black early adopters of and black latecomers to the Internet and other digital media technologies a discovery of the latest inchoate mass medium to be appropriated for unfettered social and cultural expressions. This is possible, of course, because their complete domination by the interests of corporate capital remains somewhat elusive, for the time being at least. It is my contention that the recent "dot-com bust" or "meltdown" occurring in the high-technology sector of Wall Street represents an important reprieve for the grassroots' organizing efforts aimed at democratizing the Internet in ways that existing mass media corporate interests disallow. Meanwhile, it appears that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is refashioning the concept and utility of a viable black public sphere in the new millennium. For example, while much has been written about the "digital divide" and the "information have-nots," too little attention has been paid to the remarkable and unintended uses to which the digitally disadvan-

taged have put the technology. As Ken Anderson noted in discussing the role of the Internet in the phenomenal success of the 1997 Million Woman March (MWM), working and so called "under-class" black women made ingenious uses of the new technology to further their own community uplift agendas.[6] Despite their relegation to the realm of the information have-nots in the information economy, those members of the MWM organization who worked with computers in their jobs downloaded the entire contents of the national and the regional MWM Web sites from their work computers for print copying. In circulating numerous paper copies of the MWM Web sites for their unconnected sisters in the 'hood, these computer literate and connected black women march members enacted their own brand of universal access to the technology. In effect, they deployed the traditional tactics of grassroots organizing (mimeographing and Xeroxing) to make the new technology (computer-generated content) responsive to the changing demands of community empowerment in an information economy. In this way, all the MWM sisters were provided with virtual computing power. Equipped with both print and on-line march instructions and specified platform issues, these inventive women, otherwise known as the information have-nots, nevertheless utilized the new information technologies to mobilize throngs as they marched on the streets of Philadelphia, upwards of a million strong, reclaiming their rights to participation in both the digital and material public spheres.

On Democratic Turf Wars and the Privatization of the Public Sphere

The problematics of space and place in American culture have been thoroughly addressed by legions of African American and feminist cultural workers in and outside the academy.[7] Literature produced by blacks and women across decades has served to denude past and present attempts to yoke social relationships based on race and gender to highly repressive structures of public and private spheres of influence. While an extensive survey of this vast data does not bear reduplication here, a sketch of certain historical struggles over access to the public sphere is necessary to our appreciation of the democratizing possibilities of postindustrial society's emergent information technocracy.

For starters, it is instructive to recall how the historical subjugation of racial minorities and women by means of the politicization of space and place in American civil society spurred frequent mass mobilizations by these groups to take their long-standing grievances to the streets. As the measured social gains of the 1950s civil rights movement begat the second

Despite their relegation to the realm of the information have-nots in the information economy, members of the MWM organization downloaded the entire contents of the national and the regional MWM Web sites from their work computers for print copying.

wave of the women's movement in the 1970s,[8] the goals of social and political equity that eluded the post–Civil War Reconstruction and suffragists' voting rights efforts a century earlier became increasingly difficult for the white male-dominated power structures to withhold. Indeed, a century of violent protests against American racism and patriarchy had borne out Frederick Douglass's truism that "power concedes nothing without a demand." Acknowledging this fact, there can be little doubt that blacks and women adroitly seized temporary and limited access to the public sphere to voice dissent over their relegation to places of powerlessness in domesticated private spaces. Although the once ever-present dangers of lynchings and rape posed a real threat for transgressing this rigid public-private divide, blacks and women refused to be deterred from their demands for unrestricted access to the public portals to power.

If such epoch-making nineteenth-century demands as Reconstruction, the suffrage movement, and the passage of the Fourteenth and the Nineteenth Amendments proved insufficient to the task of opening up the public sphere to genuine attempts at resolving the Negro and woman "questions," how, then, do we account for those grudging concessions to similar demands brought by the generation of the 1960s? While the uncomplicated view might suggest answers attributable to a natural or historical evolution of public attitudes, a more probing analysis uncovers the central role of less passive determinants at work. The persuasiveness of new telecommunications technologies such as the telephone, radio, film, and television inaugurated new technological methods of social arbitration that factored greatly in this historical contest of wills.

Black Technophiles Are in the Virtual House: The Phenomenal Rise of Black Participation On-Line

In the cacophonous rush to judgment by new media technology gurus, academics, politicians, and cyberpunk novelists divining the eventual contours of the coming information society, concern over issues of racial equity or the impact of the growing black presence in cyberspace has been conspicuously muted until now. This deafening silence in evolving discourses on new information technologies during the mid-1980s on through the late 1990s, what Theodore Roszak (1994) terms "the cult of information" (xxi), might be owing to a general presumption of black nonparticipation in the incipient technosphere or perhaps to a belief in something akin to what I am calling "black technophobia." After all, the recursiveness of theories claiming "scientific" evidence of black intellectual inferiority manages to find new means of attaining cultural currency,

as Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's 1994 book *The Bell Curve*'s *longue durée* on national bestseller lists illustrates. Consequently, the overwhelming characterizations of the brave new world of cyberspace as primarily a racialized sphere of whiteness inhere in popular constructions of high-tech and low-tech spheres that too often consign black bodies to the latter, with the latter being insignificant if not absent altogether. Any close scrutiny of early editions of specialized computer magazines, such as *Wired* and *Mondo 2000*, mass-market advertisements for computer products in both print and electronic media, cyberpunk novels, and even scholarly treatises on the intersections of technology and culture bears out this troubling future vision, although in the last year or so blacks have become increasingly prominent as consumer-users of computer products in both television commercials and print advertisements. Nonetheless, in the wake of many mainstream cybercritics' and cyberpunk subcultural elites' imaginative figurations of a cybernetic future untroubled by the complication of blackness, black people have forged a more expansive view of technological progress.

From 1995 to the present, the swelled ranks of black people throughout the African diaspora connecting to the Internet, particularly to the World Wide Web, have forced a new reckoning with the rapidly changing configuration of the new electronic frontier. For a time, the structured absences of black bodies that have marked most popular imaginings of the brave new world order were in danger of reifying an updated myth of black intellectual lag, or black technophobia. Instead, I want to suggest an alternative scenario—a myth of black technophilia. In fact, the unanticipated dramatic upsurge in black participation on the Internet from 1995 onwards captured the imaginations of print headline writers across the country. The headlines are suggestive of a black technofuturist enthusiasm that harkens back to the celebratory discourses of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian poet, novelist, and critic of the industrial age, widely regarded as the founder of a pro-technology sentiment termed *futurism*.[9] Consider this sampling of sensational headlines: "Revving Up Their Computer Power: Now Black Americans Are Outpacing Whites on Online Services" (*Washington Post*, 19 September 1997); "Suddenly, a Boom in Sites Geared toward African Americans" (*Boston Globe*, 2 January 1996); "Laptop over Hip-Hop: The African American Pocket-Protector Crowd Upgrades to the Next Generation" (*San Jose Metro Paper*, 6–12 November 1997); "The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams: The Inner City Computer Society Promotes the Practical Applications of Technology and the Wonders of the Internet" (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1995); "For the Kids' Sake: Turn off TV, Turn on PC" (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 August 1996); "Getting Plugged into the Computer Age" (*Los*

Angeles Sentinel, 21 September 1995); "At Netnoir, History Is Now" (*Denver Post*'s *Connectime Magazine*, January 1997); "Seeing a Future with More Blacks Exploring the Internet" (*USA Today*, 20 February 1997); "New Black Cyberhood on the Web" (*American Visions Magazine* [February–March 1997]); "Virtual Community for African-Americans" (*New York Times*, 8 October 1998).

As the race for cyberspace began revving up for what may well be its determining lap, the forceful entrance of a black Marinettian contingent at century's end signaled African diasporic peoples' refusal to be excluded from this all-important running. And while the mainstream press did take notice of this emerging black cyberfever, the sporadic nature and incredulous tone of much of the coverage betrays a sense of condescension, ghettoization, trivialization, and a general air of dismissiveness. For example, Dana Canedy's 8 October 1998 *New York Times* full-page feature article highlighting "black oriented sites," entitled "Virtual Community for African-Americans," exemplifies many of these tendencies. In one discussion, subheaded "A Contemporary Bookstore," Canedy describes the site of a black retail partner of Amazon.com in this way: "The problem is that it could be so much more. Mosaicbooks.com bills itself as a showcase for 'the latest in black and Hispanic literature,' so beyond the Book of the Month picks, you won't find much of the classic work of authors like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes." Now, given the fact that the late Baldwin and Hughes are not likely to be producing "the latest in black and Hispanic literature," no visitors to this site should expect to find the best of Baldwin and Hughes's oeuvres. So where is the problem here? Similarly, in his critique "For Buppies with a Capital 'B,'" Canedy takes Buppie.com to task for being not quite good enough:

> Even some of the more current information seemed forced into categories that don't quite fit. This past summer, for example, under "Issues Affecting Us," there was an article in [*sic*] about President Clinton's top Secret Service agent being forced to testify before the grand jury in the Monica Lewinsky matter. First of all, the account never clearly stated whether the agent is black, which is relevant only because the article was included on a black-oriented website. More to the point, the site never addressed the issue of how this article would affect African-Americans.

Again, where is the problem here? Most of the issues and circumstances that affect African Americans are not determined or influenced by black agents or black participation no matter how organized and valiant efforts are to the contrary. Nonetheless, their impact on black lives is no less significant or deterministic as far as the fate of this community is concerned. The assumption that African Americans should only care about so-called

black issues has its corollary in the racist presumption that nonblack people would or should not be interested in "black" issues.

Despite a generally dismissive tone, Canedy singles out one black Web site on which to heap measured praise. The feature's lead article, entitled "Library/Black Oriented Sites," provides capsule descriptions of nine specified sites ranging from the highly specialized, such as the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, to the more familiar, namely *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines' on-line editions. What Canedy finds is that "overall, black-oriented sites have a lot of the same information, although Net Noir, for one has worked hard to be more comprehensive and is designed so well that it stands apart from the pack." I offer these observations even though Canedy's equivocating feature story does what few popular press journalists had by 1998, and that is to acknowledge, promote, and qualitatively consider the fact and diversity of black on-line engagement. Still, the diminution of these black-oriented sites betrays arbitrary evaluative criteria. More typically, however, black homesteading on the electronic frontier gets discussed with a focus on individual Web sites and net users in isolation and figured as anomalous.

Consider two other examples of rhetorical incredulity over black Internet use. One centers on a valiant struggle for computer literacy in a Harlem housing project. The other spotlights one woman's discovery of the joys of e-commerce for her small pie shop in Compton, California. The problem with the first article, a 29 July 1997 *Village Voice* article entitled "Tech Tyke: A Six-Year-Old Brings Computer Education to the Projects," is, yet again, one of narrative emphasis. Athima Chansanchai's laudatory report on six-year-old Jerra Bost's prodigious feat of teaching in her father's after-school computer program, which "attracts anywhere from forty to sixty kids," is undermined by the stress on the program's only two working computers that were salvaged, "four primitive software programs, which have been eclipsed by a decade's worth of progress," the center's sweltering heat, Jerra's father Jerome Bost's fifteen unsuccessful grant proposals for funding support, and a familiar disparagement of the Harlem neighborhood.[10] Plucky survivalist narrative frame aside, the prospect of future success as conveyed here is negligible at best, and impossible at worst. A similar discursive thrust problematizes the 12 November 1995 *Los Angeles Times* feature story "The Virtual Pie Shop and Other Cyber Dreams." Confounding the four-column-width photo of four capable-looking black members of the Inner-City Computer Society posed in front of a computer screen displaying a member Web site is Randal C. Archibold's color commentary. From his story introduction and throughout, Archibold positions Raven Rutherford, her midtown storefront pie shop, and the Compton neighborhood far behind and even outside of the

technological norm and its concomitant adoption curve. He writes, "Just a year ago, the only bytes Rutherford understood were the ones taken from her blackbird pie or oatmeal cake. . . . Members like Rutherford show what the society is all about . . . sparking awareness of computer technology and the Internet among those who never thought it could do anything for them." Highlighting the effectiveness of the computer society need not hinge on negating African American small business owners' familiarity with and routine usage of computers in business. The article quotes one group member as saying, "Our biggest obstacle is fear of the technology." A professor at Florida Atlantic University claimed in the article that "it's extra difficult to write something for the inner city. . . . The inner-city people I have dealt with really want to know where the business loans and jobs are. . . . People have asked me, how does my page on the Internet show how to get a bank loan? The Internet doesn't answer immediate needs." If we accept this professor's characterization of what black people wanted and expected from on-line services, and given that these desires were expressed in 1995, then it appears that writing for the inner city was "extra difficult" because these black people were ahead of the curve. We can make this assertion because these "immediate needs" and more are indeed answered on the Internet as traditional businesses such as banks and loan services have rushed to embrace e-commerce. As with the *Village Voice* article, this story concludes somewhat pessimistically: "But few novices seem to have Rutherford's zeal. Sure, she has found frustration: Her modem doesn't always work, and the other day she was trying to figure out how to type commands into her machine without the aid of a mouse. Nevertheless she speaks effusively about the possibilities of a virtual pie shop."

No wonder the rhetoric of "the digital divide" functions to obfuscate a parallel "digital delirium" reality as descriptive of blacks' relationship to the digital revolution.[11] The situation of mainstream coverage of this virtual community's on-line activity parallels mainstream press coverage of violence and crime, wherein an overemphasis on sensational and unusual criminal acts occurs simultaneously with a de-emphasis on the declining rates of crime. In both cases, the impact of the information disseminated is often heightened or blunted by the proportion and tone of the issue's presentation. It is for these reasons that Canedy's and other popular press accounts of black technolust serve to contain and marginalize the impressive fact of black early adopters in the once superelite culture of the embryonic information age. Perhaps our nation's ongoing ignorance of African American early adoption of and involvement with prior innovative media technologies, such as the printing press, cinema, radio, and, to a

lesser extent, video, authorizes much of today's myopic consideration of black technological sophistication.

Geopolitics in the Digital Age

The hyperbolic rhetoric designating the Internet and the World Wide Web as "super information highways" and as the gateway or on-ramp to the information age did not go unnoticed by the African diasporic community. While some remained skeptical of the discursive onslaught of utopic claims for the revolutionary digital democracy, many were affected by the gold rush mentality that seems to have triggered a bout of global cyberfever. It is important to understand that the current scramble for domination and domestication of the Internet and the World Wide Web is not unlike that unleashed on the African continent by the West in the nineteenth century. This "scramble for Africa" analogy as a narrative frame for contextualizing the stakes involved in the Internet revolution was dually inspired. One inspiration was the spate of newspaper articles covering the speed with which African Americans were entering the fast lanes of the global infobahn discussed earlier. Another suggested itself as news surfaced of the global media corporations' scramble to colonize the Internet through their highly publicized strategies of merger mania and media convergence rhetoric. And while print reports detailing an unanticipated surge in black on-line connectivity only hint at what any netizen (virtual citizen of the Internet) or Net novice today who types in the keywords "black" and "African" as any portion of a keyword search quickly discovers: these search commands yield hundreds to hundreds of thousands of "results," "hits," or "category matches" (in the argot of Internet search engines Lycos, Yahoo, and many others). This study reveals that since 1991, black people throughout the African diaspora have mounted their own scramble for a secure share of the Internet spoils in the intensifying global grab for Internet dominance.

As one of history's most profound and far-reaching cycles of corporate expansion and domination since the industrial age's robber barons and corporate trusts, today's megamedia mergers threaten to obliterate any remaining optimism about preserving the last vestiges of a viable and unsponsored public sphere.[12] Indeed, the political engine of deregulation responsible for powering the economic force of the ascendant global media behemoths has the capacity and intent now to rock our worlds. No sooner had the centripetal forces of technological innovation produced newer, democratizing models of mass media diversity such as cable, satel-

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lite, Internet, wireless, and other wide-ranging digital communications systems, than the older media concerns set in motion a centrifugal countermodel of mass media monopolizing and reconsolidation, better known as convergence. Because these newer media were poised to undermine what Ben Bagdikian calls the media monopoly, many believed the decentralized nature and transnational reach of these new media industries signaled a new age of participatory democracy and by extension progressive social equity and creative cultural rejuvenation. It seemed that finally new multimedia forms might function to serve and promote the diverse communicative needs of a changing, multicultural world. The arrival and rapid diffusion of the Internet and the World Wide Web were central to this vision of inevitable global transformation, as the Internet's role in prodemocracy movements in several developing nations attest. One contemporary critic, who underscores the connection between the Internet and geopolitical change, is Ingrid Volkmer. In Volkmer's estimation:

> the Internet can be regarded as an icon of a globalized media world that has shifted global communication to a new level. Whereas television was a harbinger of this new era of global communication by reaching a worldwide audience with worldwide distribution and innovative global programming (such as that of CNN and MTV), the Internet reveals the full vision of a global community. . . . the implications are obvious: national borders are increasingly disappearing within cyberspace. (1997, 48)

Not only do national borders increasingly disappear in cyberspace, they are replaced by new kinship structures now predicated on the fluidity of cybernetic virtual communities and homelands.

In his influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (1993) reminds us that "nationality, or . . . [the] world's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind" (4). It is essential to Anderson that we understand how "nation-ness" is often historically determined and its meanings subject to change over time (4). And yet for Anderson it is crucial to recognize the profound emotional legitimacy of nationalisms despite the challenge of subnationalisms within many tenuous nationalist borders, as the recent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the bloody coups responsible for reconfiguring many "Third World" nations clearly attest. "Nation, nationality, nationalism," as Anderson points out, "all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse" (3). Clearly then, the historical changes and technological innovations responsible for the Internet threaten to exacerbate the slippery and increasingly fragile traditional nationalisms while simultaneously strengthening the affective dimensions of a newer

virtual or cybernationalism now unbound by traditional ideological, political, economic, geographical, and even temporal boundaries and limitations. Moreover, we must now work to proffer new definitions and analyses of these new brands of African diasporic cybernationalisms as they existed in the early years of the Internet's global formation.

As early as 1992 the African diaspora was willfully and optimistically dispersed into the transnational ether of the Internet by many tech-savvy African nationals and expatriates living and working abroad. For these black geeks the lure of cyberspace represents "the possibility of vast, unexplored territory" (Balsamo 1996, 116) capable of sustaining new modes of postcolonial African unity, of sorts, often untenable on the continent given the political and military economies of "real" space. Among African early adopters of the Internet and the World Wide Web were those visionary tech-evangelists—or cyberwitchdoctors, if you will—who conjured such new Africanities on-line as Naijanet, the Association of Nigerians Abroad, the Buganda Home Page, the African National Congress Home Page, and others. By 1997 more black diasporic Web sites began appearing, including ones for the Republic of Ghana, the Afro-Caribbean Chamber of Commerce, Camden (UK) Black Parents' and Teachers' Association, Canadian Artists' Network: Black Artists In Action, Egypt's Information Highway Project, and Africa Online, among others too numerous to consider here.

The first steps "toward developing a Nigerian online network took place in 1991" when a Nigerian at Dartmouth College began forwarding to select friends e-mail news about the home country (Bastian 1999). From this inauspicious beginning sprang Naijanet, one of the Internet's most robust and enduring Afrocentric virtual communities. Bastian reports that since 1992 "Naijanet has spun off at least six related online networks," and that at its height of influence and popularity in 1995 "Naijanetters" numbered approximately 750. We begin by considering what this phenomenon portends for rethinking issues of postcoloniality. One of the more recognizably transformative aspects of postcoloniality being wrought by the digital age is a new, discursive Africanity visible in chat rooms and listservs of several Nigeria-centered subnets engendered by Naijanet. This postindependence conceptualization of a virtual Nigerian consanguinity is remarkable because, as Emeka J. Okoli reminds us, "the British arrogantly realigned Nigerian political structures to serve their own interest at devastating consequences on relations between Nigerian ethnic populations, which include between 178 and 300 languages and more than 250 cultures, each having its own customs, traditions" (1999, 32–33). Nigeria's so-called "independence" in 1960 has been ineffectual in bridging the bitter divisions between such major ethnic groups as

Housas, Igbos, and Yorubas. Neither has it alleviated their mutual suspicions (33). Sandy Stone points out that usenets and e-mail networks are new spaces that instantiate "the collapse of the boundaries between the social and technological, biology and machine, natural and artificial" (85). Thus, Naijanetters used the new spaces of the Internet to refuse crucial elements of this debilitating colonialist legacy and through CMC to re-image a new Africanity in cyberspace. Because the digitized postcolonial condition forestalls the necessity of putting real flesh and blood bodies on the line in service to the nation-state—taking primacy over ethnic group allegiance—Naijanetters used their virtual bodies regularly to challenge and contest one another as well as to amplify problems in their homeland. One challenge that simultaneously embodied and threatened the "true spirit of Naija" was the insistent articulation of African women's long-standing discontent vis-à-vis gender oppression. Just as Naija's free speech ethos helped foster painfully honest dialogues and vigorous debates about the politics of language-chauvinism and ethnic "tribalism," so too were grievances and recriminations about the persistence of women's "double colonization" given voice—at least for a time.

The Black Press in the Age of Digital Reproduction

> We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us.
> —John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish

Since John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish's 1827 founding of *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American–owned and –controlled newspaper, the black press has functioned as a reliable register of African American struggle and progress in the United States.[13] At the same time, it has served as a potent political and ideological force in galvanizing mass support for a wide array of black protest and cultural movements. Conceived from the outset as both a political and ideological weapon for the eradication of slavery and other antebellum atrocities, the earliest black political pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and other forms of black writing established a tradition of protest literature that has been a prominent feature throughout the history of the press's "uplift" mission, or journalistic freedom fighting. Equally important as its struggles for racial justice, particularly during heightened moments of political and economic crises, was the press's role as cultural arbiter and promoter.[14] African Americans' long-standing quest for racial equity and due process in the United States is marked by a series of epochal migrations. In charting the contemporary black press's migratory patterns to cyberspace, it becomes abundantly

clear that predictions and lamentations about the inevitable demise of the nation's black newspapers continue to prove unreliable.

In 1995, when the *Afro-American* newspaper began its "homesteading on the electronic Frontier," it was the first of the established black newspapers to do so. It even predates most mainstream establishment papers' notice of the nascent technology's imminent threat and competitive positioning, not to mention these entrenched media's delayed plunge into this new media abyss.[15] What the *Afro*'s early presence in cyberspace recalls is earlier instances of vital and significant black involvement with former new media technologies such as film (before the advent of sound), radio, and TV.[16]

My survey of select historic black presses' migration to the Internet clearly reveals their commitment to continue the struggle for black political, social, cultural, and economic survival and prosperity well into the digital age. What the on-line incarnations of the *Afro-American*, *Indianapolis Recorder*, *Charlotte Post*, and *Philadelphia Tribune* newspapers represent, besides a corrective to a presumption of black technophobia, is African Americans' robust technological participation in the nation's postmodern public sphere, or what Nancy Fraser (1990) more accurately sees as an agglomeration of many "counterpublics." These presses, in print and on-line, exemplify Fraser's challenge to Marxist critic Jurgen "Habermas's account of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere [that] stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all," when "women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds" (63).

Moreover, they seem to confirm Houston Baker's (1995) black revisionist notion of the Habermasian public sphere ideal. For Baker, the fact that blacks might find attractive or believable the notion of a public sphere that had its origins in a system of property ownership and literacy from which blacks were excluded by law is difficult at best. But, following Fraser, Baker sees the potential for transcending these limitations, specifically for black communities. Baker recognizes that African Americans are drawn to the possibilities of structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning. Fully rational human beings with abundant cultural resources, black Americans have always situated their unique forms of expressive publicity in a complex set of relationships to other forms of American publicity (meaning here, paradoxically enough, the sense of publicity itself as authority) (13). And it is the expressive, self-fashioning, and emancipatory potential of the Internet, at this still-nascent moment, that enables the historic black press to affect a structural transformation of publicity to disseminate widely black counterhegemonic

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interpretations of local and global events, thus bearing out Baker's black public sphere thesis. With the growing power and dominance of global media conglomerates, it is evident that the revolutionary digital public sphere developing in cyberspace represents the hope and promise for the ongoing survival of the independent black presses, established ones and upstarts alike.

Where established black cyber presses such as the *Post*, the *Recorder*, the *Afro-American*, the *Tribune*, *Ebony*, and *Jet* (among others) provide a necessary link to the past and its lessons, newer ones like the *Capital Times*, the *Conduit*, *One Magazine*, and even the journal *Callaloo* become beacons lighting the pathways of progress to the future. As it stands currently, the black press presence in cyberspace is promising indeed; it remains to be seen, however, whether the Internet and this counterpublic will continue to coevolve as the World Wide Web matures. If the history of the black press is its prologue, then we can be confident that the story of the black press in cyberspace will be epic and regenerative. Epic too will be the story of the African diaspora in the coming era of ever-newer migrations.

Notes

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1. Apparently, for Yahoo the term *Afrocentric* is interchangeable with *black*, and it functions more generally and descriptively than philosophically or ideologically as Molefi Asante uses the term.

2. The *Bakke* decision became the legal watershed event that set the stage for the successful passage of Proposition 209 and the rest. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled on 3 November 1997 that Prop. 209 would stand and that appeals against the measure would not be heard. The *New York Times* reported on 2 November 1997 that "the number of minorities entering U.S. Medical schools dropped 11% this year, most drastically in states affected by affirmative action rollbacks. . . . Some educators . . . fear the figures show that actions of a federal court in Texas and the voters of California to end educational preferences for minorities are echoing through the nation." The report cites medical schools in California, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana as particular cases in point (A-23).

3. See Roszak (1994) for an insightful discussion of the symbiosis of the 1948 discovery of cybernetic information theories and microbiological research into cracking the "genetic code" of DNA. According to Roszak, Norbert Weiner's "too esoteric" work on cybernetics "found its most dramatic support from another, unexpected quarter: Biology—or rather, the *new* biology, where the most highly publicized scientific revolution since Darwin was taking place. In 1952, microbiologists James Watson and Francis Crick announced that they had

solved the master problem of modern biology. They had broken the 'genetic code' hidden deep within the molecular structure of DNA. The very use of the word 'code' in this context is significant. . . . It immediately seemed to link the discoveries of the biologists to those of the new information theorists, whose work had much to do with the 'encoding' of information. . . . Since its inception, the new biology has been so tightly entwined with the language and imagery of information science that it is almost impossible to imagine the field developing at all without the aid of the computer paradigm" (16–17).

4. These ideas are found throughout Jacques Derrida's writings, including his books *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

5. For a thorough treatment of the confluence of African and European musical traditions, see Jones 1963.

6. I learned of the Million Women March organizers' use of the Internet in telephone and on-line discussions with Ken Anderson, the march Web master, in 1997.

7. For discussions of race, gender, and public spaces, consult, for example, such works as hooks 1989; Locke 1992; Smith 2000.

8. See Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage, 1970) for a rare acknowledgment of the civil rights movement's direct influence on 1970s feminism in America.

9. There are numerous on-line exegeses of Marinetti and his celebration of the mechanical age. Among the sites conveying information on Marinetti are: "Marinetti: 'Joy' and 'Manifesto,'" www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/marinetti.html and *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., s.v. "Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso" (www.bartleby.com/65/ma/marinetti.html).

10. The conclusion of Chansanchai's article includes the following quote from a 131st Street Block Association administrator: "The idea behind Jerra's self-esteem is that she knows she is somebody, that she is a leader in her own right and not a struggling kid. On 110th and Lexington, when she walks out, the whole path from here to the school is negative. The whole environment is negative."

11. I borrow the phrase "digital delirium" from Kroker and Kroker 1997.

12. In 1987 Ben Bagdikian commented on the role of big media corporations in narrowing the information spectrum of American citizens. Bagdikian writes: "Each year it is more likely that the American citizen who turns to any medium—newspapers, magazines, radio or television, books, movies, cable, recordings, video cassettes—will receive information, ideas, or entertainment controlled by the same handful of corporations, whether it is daily news, a cable entertainment program, or a textbook. Any surprise of a few years ago is replaced by the demonstration that media giants have become so powerful that government no longer has the will to restrain them. Corporate news media and business oriented governments have made common cause. The public, dependent on the media giants for its basic information, is not told of the dangers" (ix). Prefiguring this cross-media consolidation or corporate cartelism, the film industry, led by Thomas Edison, effected its own brand of media monopoly. For a cinema history discussion of the Edison trust, see, for example, Robert Sklar, "Edison's Trust and How It Got Busted," in *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

13. Pride and Wilson (1997) make the important distinction between "a strictly Negro newspaper," which *Freedom's Journal* initiated, and an "abolitionist newspaper run by whites with Black assistance" (9). Apparently, the distinction turns on the fact of black fiscal and editorial control over all aspects of the newspaper in question. In this case, of course, the model is Cornish and Russwurm's weekly newspaper, the *Freedom's Journal.*

14. It is true that without black press venues the literary careers of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and George Schuyler, among many, many others would likely have been impossible given the racial chauvinism of the white literary establishment. In fact, the remarkable science fiction texts *Black Empire* and *Black Internationale*, written as novellas by Schuyler and appearing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the mid-1930s, were nearly lost to us until their recent republication by Northeastern University Press. According to the editors of the recent edition of *Black Empire*, Schuyler wrote more than four hundred pieces of fiction for the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the thirties alone (Robert A. Hill and Kent Rassmussen, eds., *Black Empire* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991], 259–60).

15. Another black press entity on-line, the *Network Journal*, boasted of its early adopter status on its Web site in July 1997. In the article "The Network Journal Celebrates a Successful First Year on the Internet," the editors announce: "The *Network Journal* was one of the first African American publications to have an online edition and still one of the few where you can read the entire stories that are in the print edition. The *Network Journal*'s website is a pioneer that blazed the Internet trail before *Black Enterprise*, *Essence*, *Emerge*, and *YSB*, among others and had established an Internet presence before the *New York Times*, the *Daily News* or the *New York Post*" (www.tmj.com/birthday/htm).

16. For example, the *New York Age* newspaper had its own weekly radio show on the WOV. The *Age*'s "radio:-: drama" columnist, Vere E. Johns, was the host of the radio program as well; see front-page advertisement for the show, *New York Age*, 14 May 1932. In "Negro History Week Radio Shows; Other Coming Events," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 February 1949, 24, there is a catalog of black programs to air over various radio stations, national and local. The *New York Amsterdam News*'s special "Television Section" contained this optimistic view of TV: "Most of our readers probably want to know, how do Negroes fit into this TV picture? They have a fair start, and should go much further—especially so, if the public demands such. At present the following Negroes have their own TV shows. Bob Howard is heard daily over CBS-TV. . . . The Three Flames, instrumental group, is heard and seen four times each [*sic*] over WNBT. Amanda Randolph has her own unusual show over WABD each weekday. She plays piano, talks chatter and interview[s] guests—not the big names but little people" ("TV High Spots for Your Daily Entertainment," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 February 1949, 19). What is interesting about the *Amsterdam News*'s supplemental section on television is the half-page–sized advertisements for the General Electric televisions sets. It seems that there is no concern about the competition this new, rival medium posed at that time.

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