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**Some Formal Remarks Toward a Theory of Afrofuturism:
Designing Liberation Technologies in Black Speculative Fiction**

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An abstract of

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

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By Clinton R. Fluker

Focusing on the contributions of Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Sun Ra, this study introduces a comprehensive theory of Afrofuturism and its relationship to science fiction studies and contemporary design theory. I also argue that by continuing to discuss Afrofuturism primarily in terms of literature and music, a considerable amount of Afrofuturism's intellectual capital is overlooked. In addition to design theory, I discuss film and comic book culture with a vigor not yet realized in scholarship on Afrofuturism. In providing a robust theoretical framework for Afrofuturism this study helps ensure that the term is no longer merely a nebulous catchphrase for black speculative fiction, but rather a philosophy unto itself that can serve as a foundation too be further developed by others. Furthermore, the theory proposed by this study offers valuable flexibility and extensibility. In highlighting how Afrofuturism appropriates language from both science fiction and design fields, I establish a model potentially applicable to the study of subcultures within Afrofuturism beyond the scope of this project.

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Introduction: On Defining Afrofuturism

In April 2016, journalist Jordi Oliveres produced a four-part video series for *The Root* entitled “What is Afrofuturism?” in which she interviewed several black artists, professionals and academics in an attempt to answer how Afrofuturism (AF) should be defined.¹ Like every journalist, academic, and student before her, she found that when approaching the question of AF, there is no definitive answer. When we consider all the definitions and academic inquiries into AF that have taken place since Mark Dery’s *Flame Wars* in 1994, we discover myriad unsettled ideas in competition with each other. This battle of ideas has led to our current situation where a comprehensive theory or definition of AF has yet to take hold.

As a result, scholarly work on the theoretical framework of AF takes many forms, two of which are particularly relevant to this project. First, AF is a tool, or more accurately a branding strategy, used across the globe to galvanize interest in black speculative fiction. Without this term, many thousands of people around the world would be unaware of the existence of black speculative fiction writers, comic book creators, or directors of Science Fiction (SF) films. Second, there have been over twenty years of academic inquiry into AF as both theory and practice. This investigation has led to a vibrant discourse used to identify *and* interpret black artistic production before and after 1994 when the term was first used.

¹ Oliveres interviewed four leading voices in AF including Ytasha Womack, Stacey Robinson, John Jennings, and Emile Cambry. See Jordi Oliveres, “What is Afrofuturism?” *The Root*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.theroot.com/watch-what-is-afrofuturism-1790855036>.

Thus, there are several generations born after the Civil Rights Movement, a demographic that renowned scholar Mark Anthony Neal refers to as the Post-Soul generation,² whose introduction to the music of artists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton or the literature of authors like Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany is through an exposure to AF. This dynamic between AF (as discourse about art) and artists (producers of art classified as AF) is complicated. Any history of AF in the twentieth century begins with Sun Ra, Butler, and Delany because their work is described as constituting historical precedents for the discourse itself. Likewise, they continue to be among the most popular names discussed in any text on the subject. However, even though commentators use AF to celebrate their contributions, as a theoretical lens the term runs the risk of subduing, if not distorting, the depth of their artistic and intellectual projects. Moreover, none of the aforementioned artists have ever referred to their own work as AF. Nevertheless, their art has inspired many people who now do, including Janelle Monae, DJ Spooky, Tananarive Due, Erika Alexander, and Krista Franklin. These artists come from different backgrounds, practice unique brands of creativity, and purposefully push the confines of genres associated with AF such as SF and Fantasy. This variety makes it difficult to articulate precisely what each artist does and why each has labeled the work AF.

This study will address the greatest issue facing AF today: the lack of a clear definition. I do not propose to provide an all-encompassing definition of the phenomena that will be acceptable to all practitioners. That would be impossible. Yet, by undertaking a

² Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

close reading of work by AF's most acclaimed artists—namely, Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra—and by investigating the practices of an often-neglected AF sub-culture, black comix, this dissertation will provide a working theory of AF. An analysis of the black comic book exhibition, *Black Kirby: The MotherBoxx Connection*, first produced by artists Stacy Robinson and John Jennings in 2012, will reveal how the cross-cultural and intertextual dialogues at play within their exhibition illuminate how AF functions as both a discourse and practice in the twenty-first century.

In addition, while much of AF happens outside of colleges and universities, a significant number of its most prominent contemporary practitioners, including both Robinson and Jennings, are professors. This study is focused primarily on forming a theory of AF relevant in the context of institutions of higher education. That is to say, my focus is to provide a definition robust enough such that students, academics, journals, and university funding structures might have a better understanding of what AF is and how it can be both enjoyable and useful to their daily pursuits. To this effect, an overview of AF's integration into the Academy will provide the context for this study's claims.

Afrofuturism: An Overview

In 1994, Mark Dery edited a book titled *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture* in which contributors examine underground movements in the United States spawned by the emergence of a popular aesthetic called *cyberpunk*. Cyberpunk first came into existence after a series of science fiction novels in the 1980s, most notably William Gibson's

Neuromancer (1984).³ In this text, Gibson tells a story featuring a dystopian future where the cultural landscape of his fictional society is low but the technological advances are high. In this world, the shiny silver spaceships that dominated SF narratives since the early twentieth century are transformed into the rustic flying machines found in movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982). In the futures depicted in the movie and in Gibson's novel, despite technological advances, society still suffers from twentieth-century social inequalities.

Perhaps most significantly for Dery, Gibson's main character is a computer hacker who illegally roams a globally networked computer system called the matrix. The matrix is strikingly similar to what would later be called the World Wide Web. In *Flame Wars*, Dery highlights how groups of people in the real world use digital technology toward socio-political ends by hacking into systems of power. The most influential chapter in *Flame Wars* is Dery's contribution, called "Black to the Future," in which he coins the term Afrofuturism:

Speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called "Africanfuturism."⁴

Following this definition, Dery's text features transcribed interviews with Greg Tate, Samuel R. Delany, and Tricia Rose. Through these interviews, Dery surveys African American cultural productions in the form of music, literature, comic books, and movies,

³ Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xi.

⁴ Mark Dery, "Black to the Future" in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

and outlines a tradition in which black people engage with technology to combat social inequalities.

In 1995, a year after Dery's *Flame Wars*, John Akomfrah of the Black Audio Film Collective directed a video essay called *The Last Angel of History*. This film examines the history of black engagement with technology through music. Akomfrah argues that when Robert Johnson discovered the Blues in the early twentieth century, he also stumbled on a "secret black technology" that could be used for time travel. The film depicts the Blues as the foundation of all popular American music, and charts how as technology becomes more advanced, black people have adapted new technologies into their own music. These technologies (including synthesizers and turntables) provided them with the ability to sample, remix, and reinterpret music from any era. The film suggests that this capability allows black people to travel in time through music and even project themselves into the future.⁵

This film serves as an introduction to the world of AF by interviewing a number of artists and intellectuals who are at the heart of the movement. One of the most prominent interviewees in the film is Kodwo Eshun, a former *Village Voice* contributor who in 1998 wrote *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. In this text, Eshun highlights the work of many musicians considered foundational to the AF aesthetic, such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, Lee Scratch Perry, Juan Atkins, and Derrick May.⁶ Eshun's text focuses on the philosophies behind their respective brands of music, how they use technology, and

⁵ John Akomfrah, dir., *The Last Angel of History* (London: Black Audio Film Collective, 1995), <http://vimeo.com/72909756>.

⁶ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

their influence on the world. Critical to Eshun's text is an exploration of how music is a media platform that enables black people to explore the concept of a human-machine interface. Nowhere is Eshun more interested in this exploration than in American Techno and British Jungle music.

Another featured interviewee in the film is the music historian John Corbett. In *Last Angel*, Corbett discusses how Sun Ra used his music to promote a mythology in which he was born on Saturn. Sun Ra's biographer, John Szwed, writes at length about how Sun Ra was an occultist obsessed with etymology, theology, and philosophy. In his text, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (1997), Szwed documents how Sun Ra used a variety of different methods to share his philosophy of life with the world including pamphlets, poetry, visual renderings on album covers, and of course, his celebrated jazz music.⁷

In recent years, one of Corbett's major contributions to the world of jazz has been to amass and document the material history discussed in Szwed's biography of Sun Ra. Corbett has edited several texts including *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn and Chicago's Afrofuturist Underground* and *Travelling the Space Ways: Sun Ra, The Astro-Black and Other Solar Myths*. In these texts, Corbett and co-editors Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis collect original items from Sun Ra's archive and provide legible prints for the reader to engage with them. These documents include handwritten notes, poems in progress, pamphlets to be passed out to the public, concept papers, and artistic sketches. In addition, the editors collect a number of critical commentaries on these archival items from

⁷ John Szwed, *Space Is The Place: The Lives And Times Of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

close collaborators of Sun Ra, experts in relevant fields, and other artists associated with AF such as Pedro Bell and Dave Muller.

In *Last Angel*, Akomfrah argues that the electronic music of Afrofuturists like Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee Scratch Perry have influenced a new generation of hip hop and techno artists who use synthesizers and other studio technologies to produce sounds that are other-worldly. During an interview in the film, DJ Juan Atkins discusses how when he started Detroit Techno in the 1980s, his objective was to make sounds that felt as if a UFO had landed on the track.⁸ Although the film is essentially about musicians who employ SF themes in their work like Atkins, many of these artists are also avid readers who have been influenced by SF novels.⁹

Akomfrah interviews SF novelists Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, two of the biggest names in contemporary discussions on AF. These authors are interviewed, in part, to drive home the standout thesis of the film: “The line between science fiction and reality is an optical illusion.”¹⁰ During the second half of the film, cultural critic and avid SF fan, Greg Tate, argues that many of the traditional SF tropes found in literature mirror the lived experience of actual black people.¹¹ In this light, the music and the literature produced by

⁸ See Akomfrah, *Last Angel of History* (1995).

⁹ In an article titled “Black Secret Technology: Detroit Techno and the Information Age,” Ben Williams discusses how DJ Derrick May was inspired by Alvin Toffler’s science fiction novel, *The Third Wave* (1980) and incorporated some of its themes about post-industrial society into his music. See Ben Williams, “Black Secret Technology: Detroit Techno and the Information Age,” in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, ed. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines, 154–76 (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Tate talks about how African slaves were alien abductees during slavery and were also subjected to weird experiments upon their arrival to North America.

the artists featured in *Last Angel* is included with the purpose of trying to promote this apparent overlap between SF narratives and the lived experience of black people.

During the mid-1990s when Dery's text and Akomrah's film were produced, the only well-known black SF writers in the United States were Delany and Butler.¹² However, after the emergence of the term AF as a galvanizing neologism for black people who engage with technology entered the American lexicon, there was a concerted effort by interested parties to search the past for other black authors in speculative fiction. In 2000, Sheree Renée Thomas edited *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, the first comprehensive collection of speculative fiction by black authors. The text includes critical essays by both Delany and Butler on the politics of racism in American SF, as well as short stories by other authors in the world of black speculative fiction such as Charles Johnson, Tananarive Due, Steven Barnes, Nalo Hopkinson, Jewel Gomez, Nishi Shawl, Walter Mosley and many more. In addition to these now household names in black speculative fiction, *Dark Matter* features the work of well-known writers whose authorship of SF writing is less widely recognized, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, known primarily for his work in criticism and literature.¹³

¹² There is considerable literature that seeks to answer why this is the case. The general consensus is that science fiction, as a genre of literature, was popularized in the early twentieth century to project fantastic, often utopic, visions of the future. However, these futures did not include black people in them, nor did they include black authors. In fact, Africa was constructed in these fictions as always behind the curb in terms of technological advancement. For more information on the racialized genre of science fiction, see Ruth Mayer's *Artificial Africa: Colonial Images of Globalization* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2002); De Witt Douglas Kilgore's *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); and Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

¹³ Sheree Renée Thomas, ed., *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner Aspect, 2000).

Also in the year 2000, several academics and artists started a listserv called Afrofuturism.net. This listserv became a haven for interested parties to exchange information and form a community dedicated to the examination and proliferation of AF.¹⁴ The founder of this group, sociologist Alondra Nelson, edited a special issue of *Social Text* titled “Afrofuturism” in 2002, where she argues that AF is more than simply a group of black people who engage with technology. Instead, this assortment of articles suggests that AF is a social movement that possesses historical roots and various contemporary outlets.¹⁵ Moreover, using Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* as a theoretical framework, Nelson argues that AF is but the latest iteration of an aesthetic practice employed by black people for centuries in an effort to subvert inequalities and work toward a better future.¹⁶

Over the next decade following the year 2000, AF moved from being a small conversation in the blogosphere to a full-fledged academic field of study in institutions of higher education across the country. As a result, numerous articles of criticism started to surface on AF as an aesthetic, philosophy, and social movement. For example, in 2003, the *New Centennial Review* published an article by Kodwo Eshun titled “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism.” In this essay, Eshun emphasizes the significance of AF in black culture by presenting an argument against critics who believe it is too concerned with the future and seeks to forget the past.

¹⁴ Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 235.

¹⁵ Essay contributors, many of whom were also members of Afrofuturism.net, include Fatimah Tugger, Alexander Weheliye, Ron Eglash, Kali Tal, Tracie Morris, Nalo Hopkinson, Tana Hargest, and Anna Everett. Their articles cover Afrofuturism through various media platforms.

¹⁶ Alondra Nelson, “Introduction,” in “Afrofuturism,” ed. Alondra Nelson, special issue, *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 9.

Eshun suggests that black people who make this argument against AF do so because they have grown up in a twentieth-century paradigm where black people are still concerned with proving to white people and to themselves that they have a rooted past.¹⁷ Eshun argues that although the project of discovering hidden black histories is an important endeavor, at the turn of the twenty-first century, power is held by people who can envision a future and the future has been monopolized by white people.¹⁸ Eshun proposes that AF is one possible solution to this problem.

In 2005 and 2006, Lisa Yaszek published a pair of notable articles about AF.¹⁹ Her most significant essay is titled “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” In this text, Yaszek focuses on the unnamed main character in the novel and demonstrates how throughout the story he performs actions that are directly in line with both Dery’s and Eshun’s musings on AF. For example, like an anonymous hacker, the novel’s main character lives secretly at the bottom of a building, invisible to the outside world, where he steals electricity through a jerry-rigged system undetected. Yaszek’s text is important because it extends a conversation about how AF can operate as an interpretive framework in cultural productions. Historically, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is referenced as a prime example of

¹⁷ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 288.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 289. In this section Eshun defines what he calls a “futures industry,” or a system of control over colonial, disenfranchised subjects. These people are left to dream of the past, while those in power steal the future.

¹⁹ Lisa Yaszek, “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2/3 (2005): 297–313; Lisa Yaszek, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 41–60. In her 2006 article, Yaszek expands on Eshun’s concept of the “futures industry.”

the great American Novel. But, after Yaszek's reinterpretation through the lens of AF, it can also be read as a piece of SF.

Though Yaszek does not use this particular language, her essay marks an early instance of theorizing AF as a hermeneutic. An essay co-authored by Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings in 2014, "Afrofuturism: The Digital Turn and the Visual Art of Kanye West" takes this concept even further by constructing a digital hermeneutic for AF.²⁰ Their article interprets the rap star persona of Kanye West as if he were a software that is upgraded with the release of each new album (Kanye 1.0, 2.0, etc.). Similar to Yaszek's piece, this article reads as if it is the introduction to a larger analysis. In many ways, my own study is in conversation with these texts as my interest is in articulating how to determine if a cultural production qualifies as AF or not.

Other academics such as Marleen Barr examine different dimensions of AF. Barr's 2008 edited volume, *Afro-future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory*, collects short science fiction stories written by black female authors and includes several critical essays about the contribution of women to the field of science fiction as a whole. This book features the work of Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, De Witt Douglass Kilgore, Nnedi Okorafor, Sheree Renée Thomas, and Octavia Butler. This text is especially important because it speaks to a characteristic of AF that separates it from

²⁰ See Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings, "Afrofuturism: The Digital Turn and the Visual Art of Kanye West," in *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, ed. Julius Bailey, 29–43 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

most other popular forms of black artistic production—it is a movement led primarily by black women and queer identifying black men and women.²¹

More recent scholarship has continued to add to the already existing theories of AF. Perhaps the most significant contemporary undertaking is the two-volume anthology *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro Blackness*, edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones. Many of the most prominent figures in the world of AF are featured authors in these volumes, the second of which will be released late 2017.²² Though not an extensive monograph on the subject, this collection of essays on AF marks the most extensive assortment of research into the field since Sheree Renée Thomas's *Dark Matter* volumes and Alondra Nelson's special issue of *Social Text*.

Afrofuturism Dissected: Issues of Scholarship

As AF started to gain popularity around the globe, the name itself also began to incorporate all kinds of speculative fiction under its umbrella. Tananarive Due, one of AF's most visible practitioners, is actually a horror writer. Her husband, Steven Barnes, though a well-known SF writer, also writes novels that have nothing to do with technology or the future. These novelists and many others are happy to accept the term AF as a promotional tool to heighten the popularity of black speculative productions. If their work can be associated with this popular term then it is easier for would-be readers to locate their novels.

²¹ Marleen Barr, ed., *Afro-future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008).

²² Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro Blackness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

Though authors like Due and Barnes are comfortable accepting the term, many artists are not.

In 2009, visual artist D. Scot Miller, a member of the Afrofuturism.net listserv, wrote an extensive blog post called “Afro-Surreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black.”²³ In this essay he presents Afrosurrealism as a new black aesthetic and social movement that participates in a black historical tradition. Miller’s primary concerns with AF are that it focuses too much on the future—nearly to the point of escapist fantasy—and that the term was coined by Mark Dery, a white man. In contrast, Afrosurrealism acknowledges that there are hidden universes filled with fantasy operating in the present. In essence, a person does not have to use technology or travel to the future in order to imagine new possibilities for black people. Instead, they can look toward the amazing imaginary of the present in the form of work produced by artists like Kara Walker²⁴ or Wangechi Mutu.²⁵

Beyond this philosophical dispute, Miller argues that Afrosurrealism participates in a historically documented black aesthetic movement. Before the imagined universes of Walker and Mutu there was Henry Dumas’s and Aime Cesaire’s surrealist poetry. Miller points out that this kind of aesthetic was coined “Afro-Surreal Expressionism” by Amiri Baraka in 1974 as part of the introduction to Dumas’s *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*.²⁶

²³ D. Scot Miller, “Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black—A 21st Century Manifesto,” *D. Scot Miller*, May 20, 2009, <http://dscotmiller.blogspot.com/2009/05/afrosurreal.html>.

²⁴ For more information on the unique art of Kara Walker, see Shaw, Gwendolyn Du Bois, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁵ For more information on the unique art of Wangechi Mutu, see Trevor Schoonmaker, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

²⁶ Miller, “Afrosurreal Manifesto.”

Therefore, according to Miller, Afrosurrealism, as a term, has a claim to black heritage that AF does not.

Miller was not the only artist to break away from AF. In fact, since then, two other budding movements, Steamfunk and Sword and Soul, have gathered followers through blogs, YouTube channels, and independent publishers. Steamfunk, an aesthetic made popular by author and filmmaker Balogun Ojetade, features narratives that are set in the nineteenth century where the steam engine is the primary form of technology. These narratives often include elements of magic in retelling well-known historical events.²⁷ For example, one text by Ojetade titled *The Chronicles of Harriet Tubman* reimagines Tubman as not only the leader of the Underground Railroad, but also as a powerful martial artist with mystical powers. Sword and Soul is described by author and filmmaker Milton Davis as a revival of a style started by Charles Johnson in the 1980s.²⁸ Essentially, Sword and Soul narratives create imagined Africas with their own unique mythologies, tribes, and heritages based on real-life African traditions. An example of this literary style can be found in Davis's novel *Meji*, a story of two African twins separated at birth and raised in neighboring tribes. Eventually, the two reunite as enemies to fight for dominion over contested land.²⁹

In 2012, author Ytasha Womack published *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Womack's book was published by a general nonfiction publisher not a university press. Her text marks the first attempt at a comprehensive exposé on AF and the

²⁷ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 207.

²⁸ Davis describes how he was inspired to write in this style based on a novel he read by Saunders titled *Imaro* (1981). See Milton Davis, ed., *Griots: A Sword and Soul Anthology* (Fayetteville, GA: MVmedia, 2011), 26.

²⁹ Milton Davis, *Meji* (Fayetteville, GA: MVmedia, 2010).

related aesthetics of Afrosurrealism, Steam Funk, and Sword and Soul. In addition, Womack presents AF as a social movement. What distinguishes Womack's claim from that of Alondra Nelson in *Social Text* is that Womack provides a lengthy historical backdrop for what AF is, examines it in several different artistic mediums, and provides a definition of AF that is far broader in scope than Nelson's: "Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation."³⁰ As the most in-depth monographic investigation into the subject matter thus far, Womack's text is useful. But her claim that AF is a social movement oriented toward black liberation does not include any intellectual inquiry into social movement theory or into the form and structure of other earlier black social movements, leaving a wide gap in scholarship, prime for rigorous academic debate.

In addition to claiming that AF is a social movement, Womack and Nelson argue that it is an aesthetic. This may indeed be the case, yet neither author interrogates the idea of aesthetics or articulates how AF fits within the parameters of that idea. One way to enter this conversation is to compare AF to other black art movements such as the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement. In 1968, Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal edited an anthology of black literature called *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. This anthology is a collection of essays, short stories, poetry, and plays. Many of the essays, including James T. Stewart's "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," discuss the concept of a black aesthetic and how the Black Arts Movement has taken steps, by producing the anthology, towards creating a new black aesthetic based on African

³⁰ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 96.

principles.³¹ The contributors to this book include famous artists whose work is relevant to AF including Sun Ra and Henry Dumas.

Another issue in scholarship on AF is that although many researchers claim it is an aesthetic and a social movement that includes various media platforms, an overwhelming majority of serious academic work on AF focuses on music and literature. There is very little scholarly inquiry into the visual culture of AF outside of the fine arts. Even in the context of fine art, the majority of this work is collected in the form of catalogs from AF exhibitions such as *Black Light/White Noise Catalog* (2007), *The Shadows Took Shape Catalog* (2012), and the *Unveiling Visions Catalog* (2016). These catalogs are accompanied by short essays written by key figures in AF such as Greg Tate, Paul D. Miller, Kodwo Eshun, Samuel R. Delany.

As it pertains to film, Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman edited a text titled *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (2011) that examines the lack of black representation in SF film and the contributions of AF to addressing this dearth in the genre.³² But this is precisely the issue with scholarship on AF and film: most of the work is concerned with the absence of black people in SF or the negative portrayals of black people when they are included. Clearly, authors who point to this issue are correct; however, there is a considerable difference between AF scholarship

³¹ In his essay, Stewart argues that when black people discuss art, they are using models or paradigms that have a white foundation. In contrast he asks for black artists to create new models based on the lived experience of black people. See James T. Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in *Black Fire An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1968), 3.

³² Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, eds., *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (Pieterlen, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2011).

on music or literature and the visual in this regard. Most of the scholarship produced after 2000 on music and literature celebrates black contributions to these fields, whereas Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film* or Daniel Bernardi's *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future*, two excellent texts on the history of black representation in the SF film, focus almost exclusively on negative portrayals.³³

One likely reason why there are so few scholars engaged in alternative critiques of black representation in SF film is that there are limited examples from which to choose. This is certainly not the case for black comic books. To date, there are but a handful of critical essays on AF that focus specifically on black-authored comic books. This is a glaring gap in scholarship because unlike films, there are a plethora of independent comic book distributors across the country producing comics everyday. Moreover, as documented by Sheena C. Howard in "Brief History of the Black Comic Strip: Past and Present," black-authored comics have a history that extends as far back as the late nineteenth century.³⁴ The fact that so few scholars associated with AF have addressed this gap in research (namely, Sheena Howard, Julian Chambliss, Jonathon Gayles, John Jennings, Reynaldo Anderson, and Adilifu Nama) means that this is one area in which the discourse on AF might be further expanded and developed.

³³ Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

³⁴ Sheena C. Howard, "Brief History of the Black Comic Strip: Past and Present," in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 11–22.

Afrofuturism, Race, and Technology

In addition to these scholarly issues, this study focuses specifically on investigating AF's engagement with the fields of critical race studies, SF studies, and design theory. Many of the aforementioned texts discuss AF's use of technology, but very few save Alondra Nelson, Kodwo Eshun, Nettice Gaskins, and Beth Coleman have written extensively about this relationship. In the first chapter, I will discuss AF's connection to contemporary design theory with particular attention to Kodwo Eshun's contribution to this debate. Here I provide a brief overview of Beth Coleman's writing about the intersection race, technology, and SF to frame my intervention into unresolved scholarly concerns in the theory of AF.

In a 2014 interview with *PopMatters*, comic book artist and self-proclaimed Afrofuturist, John Jennings, states: "Afrofuturism is engaged with a 'pan technological' viewpoint. It sees everything as a type of technology that can be hacked into, decoded, and made to function for a new agenda. This includes, race, religion, gender etc."³⁵ This notion that anything can be framed as a technology is paramount to discourse on AF. This debate frames AF as both a cutting-edge commentary on race and technology and presents theoretical issues that border on re-inscribing the ethical dilemmas within the genre of SF that AF claims to address—namely, that if race is defined as a technology itself, then social inequity pertaining to race might be ignored in the service of future technological development.

³⁵ Julian Chambliss, "Black Kirby Now: An Interview with John Jennings," *Pop Matters*, February 20, 2014, <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/179294-black-kirby-now-an-interview-with-john-jennings/>.

Beth Coleman, an important voice in the world of AF, engages the concept of the pantechological by returning to the ancient Greek etymology of the word “technology” in her article, “Race as Technology.”³⁶ Coleman states that in ancient Greek, *techne* refers to a meaning more closely aligned with “technique.” Thus, *techne* is akin to the manner in which a person masters the use of something such as a tool. This definition of technology is in contrast to today’s meaning which is more closely aligned with the tool itself or the machine. Coleman is keen to highlight that the Greek formulation of *techne* primarily targets a human being’s acumen for using a tool: “[S]uch demonstrations of skill suggest that the ability to render results rests with the maker, not the tools. That is important to recognize as tools inevitably change over time.”³⁷ Her objective in this discussion on technology is to provide a precedent for creating an intrinsic connection between the self and the tool. Coleman argues that in the fields of anthropology and philosophy, toolmaking is often argued to be part of the ontology of being human. Therefore, in this view the forging of different tools to perform tasks does not create a divide between humanity and technology, but rather reinforces a natural bond between the two where a given tool is an extension of the self.

With this in mind, Coleman proposes that race, historically a notion that is ascribed to the body by a number of factors including appearance, might be theorized as a form of technology itself. Coleman argues that by using *techne*, “race exists as if it were on par with a hammer or a mechanical instrument; denaturing it from its historical roots, race can then

³⁶ Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology” *Camera Obscura* 70 24, no. 1 (2009): 177–207.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

be freely engaged as a productive tool.”³⁸ This argument suggests that race is not an objective value inherent to all human beings, but rather a highly subjective characteristic that, despite its historical significance, can potentially be considered an invention, a system of values, used to accomplish specific objectives like a tool. Her assertion rests on the contributions of several theorists, most notably Immanuel Kant.

Using Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Coleman seeks to sway discourse about race away from science into the realm of ethics. She argues that if race can be denatured from the body—that is, removed ideologically from the realm of the biological—then it might be framed as a tool that can be used for either good or bad. She states that at present, race has been used as an object of history to “vividly and violently” insight “terrorism, systems of apartheid, and demoralizing pain.”³⁹ But, as a tool, race might be used differently as a mechanism of agency.⁴⁰ For this theory to work, Coleman suggests that race be considered a “disinterested object”—a concept Kant develops as part of his critique on how to form aesthetic judgements. Coleman characterizes Kant’s thesis as a thought experiment: “In moving through the mechanisms of judgement, Kant points to a necessary disinterestedness on the part of the judge. To make a proper judgement, one must be free of ‘agreeable sensations.’”⁴¹

For Coleman, race has been subject to agreeable sensations for far too long. She argues that racial difference has been naturalized for centuries as *lack*. Because of this long

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 180.

⁴¹ Ibid., 181.

history with race, it becomes agreeable for us to see race in this fashion. Yet race can also be theorized as historically providing comfort and solace for people. Its bond to the social fabric of the United States is so strong that it often functions as a primary manner for individuals and groups alike to form identity and participate in cultural practices. Contrarily, Coleman proposes that “in aspiring to disinterest in an object that has been so terribly interesting for us, we can dislocate race from its historically embedded status.”⁴² Thus, by using Kant’s tools, Coleman proposes that an aesthetic and an ethics of race as a form of technology can be established and “an agent can judge the strategic value of one mode of representation over another.”⁴³ Arguably, this formulation will allow for a person, particularly a person of color, to use their racial difference toward their own goals as opposed to being relegated to the status of a victim of racial discrimination.

Coleman proceeds to demonstrate how race as a technology might actually function in real life by referencing President Barack Obama’s speech on race during the 2008 presidential election campaign. She argues that during this speech, Obama leverages his own biracial ethnicity as a tool, a form of technology, in order to reshape America’s view of the American Family during the course of the campaign: “Race became, in the hands of Obama in that speech, a levered mechanism in an overall campaign for the electorate, as opposed to a contraption by which he was framed.”⁴⁴ She also argues that, perhaps, Obama’s most impressive accomplishment was “his art of disappearance in that primary race.”⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 182.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 189

⁴⁵ Ibid., 188.

Coleman proposes that Obama moved in and out of social worlds inscribed with racial landmines fluidly and adroitly. While still acknowledging his own mixed race, he was able to appeal to a vast electorate.

Coleman's argument raises several issues, not least of which is its association with contemporary discourse on post-blackness, or rather the idea that racial justice is achievable most efficiently through an erasure of history attached to the racialized body. Her thesis that race and, by extension, the body can be theoretically denatured from history, might follow logically from her starting point of *techne*, but the entire operation requires a disinterest not just in agreeable sensations, but in the history that informs them as well. Arguably, black people from the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and the Black Arts Movement, to name a few, have been leveraging their racial agency for generations without performing such a detachment.

Rather than aspire toward race as a disinterested object, members of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement alike discussed racial inequality by framing their arguments for justice in terms of history. Moreover, while AF is certainly concerned with the future, it does not have to do so at the expense of negating historical precedents. On the contrary, the history of race and racism in the United States is essential to AF's appropriation of technology. The problem with Coleman's essay is not that race cannot be framed as a technology, it certainly can be, as she demonstrates. Rather, for her theory of ethics to work, she must first rewrite the history of race in America. And race is not just a feature of US history that can be conveniently restructured for the sake of argument; it is foundational to the society's very structure.

Race in Afrofuturism

In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, acclaimed law professor Derrick Bell argues that black people occupy the position at the bottom of the well in the United States and that white people, whatever their socio-economic status, will always be reluctant to let down the rope. He argues that racism is not just a symptom or another issue in society, but that it is a permanent, enduring characteristic of the nation. Quoting Jennifer Hochschild, Bell states:

Liberal democracy and racism in the United States are historically, even inherently, reinforcing; American society as we know it exists only because of its foundation in racially based slavery, and it thrives only because racial discrimination continues. The apparent anomaly is an actual symbiosis.⁴⁶

Despite this stance, Bell does not despair; instead, he suggests that the acknowledgement of this reality is a liberating epiphany. Bell believes that the acceptance of one's social stratification allows for a person to move forward and create the world they want to live in with a complete understanding of the nature of the system. Comparing the plight of black people in America with a man or woman facing certain death in defiance, Bell argues that "African Americans must confront and conquer the otherwise deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status ... [B]eyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly both a reason and the means for future struggle."⁴⁷

Bell's insistence on the permanence of race and racism in the US is less significant to this discussion on AF than his theory that the structure, and thereby the laws that

⁴⁶ Jennifer Hochschild, quoted in Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 9.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 12.

regulate American society, are fused with racial inequality. If the American system of justice is inherently racist, as Bell argues, any theory of justice that denies or glosses over this foundational characteristic is incomplete. Coleman demonstrates through her etymological investigation into ancient Greek philosophy that race can be interpreted as a technology, although by basing the utility of that technology in Western social contract theory, she develops a theory of ethics that views justice in terms of colorblindness. As deduced from Bell's argument, colorblind justice is a fantastical concept in an American context where the very foundation of the justice system is immersed in racial inequality.

Bell's take on US history is particularly useful to this study's discussion of the intersection of AF, design, and technology because it details how race might influence why a tool is used. AF recognizes that simply because something is a tool, it does not mean that it is divorced from history. In fact, the history associated with an object informs how its perceived utility is deployed. Moreover, future tools conceived in an imaginary space do not derive from a historical vacuum they too are subject to the social concerns of the present day.

Afrofuturism and World-Building

The role of race as intrinsic to AF's world-building techniques is a central theme in the work of the scholars and practitioners discussed thus far. In AF, race is strikingly present, informing the discourse from beginning to end. Returning to Coleman's argument regarding ethics and Kant's disinterested object, instead of denaturing race from its history so that it might be used as a tool, this study argues that AF embraces this history and fashions it as the center of ethical deliberations. Consider John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*

and his thought experiment, the veil of ignorance. In the tradition of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, and John-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Rawls proposes a social contract theory that employs the concept of *the original position*.

In the *original position*, members of a would-be society inhabit a hypothetical situation where they determine the rules, regulations, and rights of the parties that will live together. No doubt, Hobbes' notion that without a strong governing structure the *state of nature* takes over where the strongest and most ruthless make the rules becomes very important. To counteract this presumed eventuality by Hobbes, Rawls proposes that in the *original position*, potential members of a social contract are shrouded in the veil of ignorance. In this thought experiment, everyone makes the rules but without any knowledge of each other's race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other categorizing factor, including their own:

Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind the veil of ignorance.⁴⁸

Through the veil of ignorance, Rawls suggests that everyone is far more likely to construct a more inclusive and "fair" social contract as it is impossible to determine where along the social strata they would be otherwise. In other words, similar to Kant's disinterested object, Rawls fashions a race and gender-blind utopia. Ironically, Rawls's

⁴⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).

choice of language betrays him as he writes of justice in the post-civil rights era. His conception of the *original position* assumes that men occupy this hypothetical space, whilst speaking of justice for all. While feminists would keenly observe such language as theorizing from a veil shrouded in sexism, Afrofuturists presume an inherent racial dynamic as well.

I argue that Afrofuturists also start from an *original position* when they create their fantastic stories. In this *original position*, they do not operate under a veil of ignorance as they construct their worlds, the ethics that determine them, and the technologies that animate them. Instead, AF's *original position* is one that includes a veil more closely aligned with W. E. B. Du Bois's description from *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the first chapter of this renowned text, Du Bois recounts the moment when he first discovered that he was black in grade school. As young boys and girls exchange visiting cards, a white girl refuses his: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different than the others ... shut out from their world by a vast veil."⁴⁹ Du Bois goes on to state, "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."⁵⁰ According to Du Bois, the veil is so powerful that its existence forces black people to engage in a *double-consciousness* where they are forced to negotiate the psychological terrain of being both black and American simultaneously.

⁴⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

Moreover, to the eyes peeping at them from the other side of the veil, these two subject positions are diametrically opposed entities.

In *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice*, Howard Winant couples Du Bois's metaphor of racial oppression with the notion of Hegelian dialectics to demonstrate how blackness and Americanness are not diametrically opposed, but instead in a dialectical relationship marked by co-dependence. In addition, black people are not the only ones who must contend with this veil. Winant states: "[T]he veil is a complex metaphor for the dynamics of race. It represents both barrier and connection between white and black. Imagine it as a filmy fabric, a soft and semi-transparent border-marker, that both keeps the races apart and mediates between them."⁵¹ As such, both black and white people look through the veil as if interpreting the world from opposite, though intimately related, dialectical positions. Winant's interpretation of the veil extends beyond individual worldviews to include social implications as well. Winant argues: "The veil signifies a profound social structure that has been built up for centuries, accumulating among the infinite contradictions of race and racism as they have shaped our identities and social organization."⁵²

Du Bois's veil is relevant to world building in AF because it helps articulate how race is foundational to its discourse. Similar to Bell's argument for the permanence of race in American society, Du Bois's veil is present in both the formulation and the interpretation of how technology is used in AF. It is through the veil that AF builds new worlds, forms

⁵¹ Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

ethical values, and designs future technologies. In this way, even if race is theorized as a technology, Du Bois's veil, not the veil of ignorance, informs how it is used and to what ends. This interpretation of AF is even written into the very name of the discourse itself, Afro-Futurism. The discourse of early-twentieth-century Italian Futurism also speaks to a culture of people who coalesce around an active engagement with futurity, but *Afro-Futurism* insists in its very name that any dialogue about the future contend first and foremost with race, as if futurity itself is enshrouded in a veil. For those scholars and critics who insist that AF either transcends race or imagines worlds without it, they must first contend with the moniker of AF itself.

Chapter Outlines

With this insistence on race's primacy in discussing AF in mind, it is important to acknowledge that although there are similarities between AF and SF, the two terms are not synonymous. AF often uses the language of SF to address social concerns, but it is not wedded to it, just as AF does not adhere to traditional notions of technology. Thus, to better understand AF, in chapter 1, I interrogate the phenomenon through the lens of SF studies and contemporary design theory so that the richness of what AF offers can be captured and examined more thoroughly. I engage these two fields through close readings of several SF studies texts written by Samuel R. Delany, including *The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, *The Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, and *The American Shore: Meditations on a Tale of Science Fiction* by Thomas M. Disch—"Angouleme." This section introduces a methodology I call AF Reading Protocols, an appropriation of Delany's SF Reading Protocols as described in the aforementioned

texts. This hermeneutic provides the tools necessary for examining AF's world-building techniques, further enabling the reader to grasp how AF, as a discourse, functions to "prothetically enhance the future" of black people.⁵³ Moreover, this methodology provides the foundation for the rest of the dissertation as I will use my own AF Reading Protocols to articulate a theory of AF in the following chapters.

In chapter 1 I also engage several scholars whose work embodies an intersection between design theory and SF studies. These authors include De Witt Douglas Kilgore, David Kirby, Michio Kaku, Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby, and Carl DiSalvo. De Witt Douglas Kilgore's *Astrofuturism: Science, Race and Visions of Utopia in Space* discusses how the 1960s US Space Race was heavily influenced by a movement he calls Astrofuturism. According to Kilgore, Astrofuturism embraces a utopian ideal of the future crafted by classic SF authors such as David Lasser, Arthur C. Clarke, Ben Bova, Wernher von Braun, Willy Ley, and Robert Heinlein. This ideal paints space exploration, and the technologies used to achieve it, as race and gender neutral. According to Kilgore, the notion of a future divorced from the social ills associated with racism and sexism inspired many in the 1960s to embrace space exploration as an escape. However, considering that the writers were all white men, the future technologies featured in these narratives, as well as the worlds themselves, end up prominently benefitting young white men over other groups.

In chapter 1, I also engage David Kirby's *Lab Coats in Hollywood: Science, Scientists, and Cinema*, Michio Kaku's *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration into the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation, and Time Travel*, and Bruce Sterling's *Shaping Things*

⁵³ Dery, "Black to the Future," 180.

because all three authors discuss the role SF plays in the development of technological innovation. These authors are particularly interested in analyzing how SF thinking is harnessed to identify scientific and design solutions to problems we often did not know even existed. Finally, I draw on Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* and Carl DiSalvo's *Adversarial Design* to analyze how technological designs might be leveraged as rhetorical arguments. This suggests that the tools we use represent more than physical space. As physical entities, they propagate socio-political ideologies that affect our daily lives.

Chapter 2, "Mining the Modular Calculus: Searching for Liberation Models in Samuel R. Delany's *Nowhere*," introduces a fictional algorithm, the *Modular Calculus*, invented by Delany for the purpose of theorizing about the nature of modeling. In this chapter, I analyze the development of this algorithm using AF Reading Protocols to address the question of how to accurately account for or model black-led socio-political revolution. This inquiry begins with a comparative analysis of Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Following this comparison, I employ the *Modular Calculus* as a tool to explain how an examination of heterotopic thinking might be equally if not more useful than the thorough accounting of chronological events in developing a complex model of black liberation movements.

Chapter 3, "Planting *Earthseed*: Octavia Butler, the Apocalypse, and Theorizing Black Feminist Epistemology," questions cultural norms surrounding contemporary knowledge production. Through a close reading of Butler's *Parable* series, I examine a new religion she invents called *Earthseed*. Using the AF Reading Protocols, I demonstrate how

Earthseed functions to destabilize unjust social norms that universalize white male theories of knowledge over new epistemologies introduced by black women. This chapter begins with a review of several acclaimed black feminist thinkers, including Wahneema Lubiano, Kimberly Springer, and Patricia Hill Collins whose work establishes the challenges black women face in the American context to have their contributions appreciated in heteronormative spaces. Following this section, I read Butler's *Earthseed* in conjunction with an analysis of Hortense Spiller's theory of the *Flesh* as discussed by Alexander Wehlieye in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Feminist Theories of the Human*. This exploration demonstrates how Butler's *Earthseed*, as a new epistemology, leads to a spiritual, mental, and physical evolution that has the potential to alleviate social ills we face in the real world.

In chapter 4, "Playing the *Space Chord*: Sun Ra, Myth, and Forging Black Secret Technologies," I discuss how Sun Ra's *Space Chord* functions as a transportation device between the real world and the world where AF technologies are developed. AF technologies such as the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord* are developed in a mythical realm marked by secret designs and esoteric knowledge, but this does not make their utility any less impactful in our day-to-day lives. Using AF Reading Protocols, I interrogate the *Space Chord's* function in Sun Ra's film, *Space is the Place*, through a close reading of David Walker's *Appeal to Colored Citizens of the World*. This text helps explain why such powerful inventions are deemed *black secret technologies* in the discourse of AF and the need for mythic reasoning to interpret them. Second, to explain more specifically how the *Space Chord* functions as a transportation device, I review Michelle Wright's *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. This text introduces

contemporary physics research into critical race theory, such that when defining blackness, we talk not only about what blackness is, but when it is as well.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, “Wielding Afrofuturistic Chronotopes: The *Black Kirby* Hero Complex,” I introduce the notion of *AF chronotopes*. I argue that the work of Delany, Butler, and Su Ra does not just participate in the AF discourse, but that together their creativity forms the foundation of a comprehensive hermeneutic for interpreting AF as an aesthetic and philosophy. By appropriating Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the *chronotope*, I argue that the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord* operate in conjunction with each other, as chronotopes, to recognize fictional narratives that occupy AF space-time. The identification of these *AF chronotopes* in artistic production is most clearly achieved through the use of AF Reading Protocols. Thus, to demonstrate this theory, I use AF Reading Protocols to identify the *AF chronotopes* in John Jennings and Stacey Robinson’s black comic book universe *Black Kirby*.

This concluding chapter represents my application of the first comprehensive theory to highlight AF’s relationship to SF Studies and contemporary design theory. This intervention is necessary because by continuing to discuss AF primarily in terms of literature and music, a considerable amount of AF’s intellectual capital is overlooked. Therefore, in addition to design theory, I introduce film and comic book culture into the discourse with a vigor not yet realized in scholarship on AF. It is my intention in this project to create a robust enough theoretical framework for AF that it is no longer a nebulous catchphrase for black speculative fiction, but rather a philosophy unto itself that can be built upon and critiqued by others. Furthermore, the theory proposed by this study is malleable. While it is certainly my goal to highlight how AF appropriates language from both SF and

design fields, there are potentially other subcultures within AF beyond the scope of my project. I encourage others to identify these gaps and continue this much-needed exploration into the world of AF.

Designing Black Space:

Samuel R. Delany, Design Theory, and AF Reading Protocols

I look at black culture much more as a series of material that's been agglomerated on one hand, and on the other, it's much more like a series of techniques. A lot of the producers and engineers I talk about see themselves as scientists or technicians. I tend to think of black culture then as an instrument or an environment that they've created.

—Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*⁵⁴

In the Introduction, I reviewed the development of AF as a cultural phenomenon and examined the scholarly discourse on AF, paying close attention to areas within the field that demand more research. In this first chapter, I engage contemporary design theorists to demonstrate AF's connection to the field of design and firmly establish a method for interpreting the different technologies created in AF narratives. This dialogue across disciplines includes Bruce Sterling's *Shaping Things*, Michio Kaku's *Physics of the Impossible*, and Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's *Speculative Everything*. Following this conversation, I review Samuel R. Delany's notion of Science Fiction Reading Protocols to develop my own hermeneutic specific to AF that appropriates the language of SF to design new and innovative technologies.

⁵⁴ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 191.

The Shape of Things to Come

Many authors in contemporary design theory write about the field's relationship to the speculative. After all, to design is to imagine something that does not already exist—to answer the question, *What if?* We may attempt to answer this question for a host of reasons, including to solve for complex theoretical problems or to improve the human experience. Likewise, professions such as urban planning, architecture, interior design, software development, and curation incorporate design practice. In each case, the use of the imagination is required to envision something for a future that has yet to manifest. This study engages the role that SF plays in the design and development of future technologies through the work of Bruce Sterling, Michio Kaku, Anthony Dunne, and Fiona Raby. Before moving into a conversation on AF, it is important to recognize how works of SF interact with the real world to produce myriad design products.

In *Shaping Things*, the prolific SF writer and design theorist, Bruce Sterling, writes about the diversity of forms technologies can take. He also writes about technologies that have yet to be invented. To accomplish this, he must enter the realm of SF and speculate about what such inventions might look like. However, before he dives into SF, Sterling establishes five categories of technology: *Artifacts*, *Machines*, *Products*, *Gizmos*, and *Spimes*. *Artifacts* are “simple artificial objects, made by hand, used by hand, and powered by muscle.”⁵⁵ A good example of an *artifact* would be a hammer or a nail. Though product manufacturing has become increasingly automated, hammers and nails can be made by hand and are not terribly complex in their construction. Moreover, their utility is directly

⁵⁵ Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 9.

commensurate to the force provided by a person's muscles. *Machines* are "complex, precisely proportioned artifacts with many integral moving parts that have tapped some non-human, non-animal power source."⁵⁶ An example of a *machine* might be a nail-gun. The function of a nail-gun may be similar to a hammer and nail, or in this case the same, but as Sterling demonstrates, *machines* and *artifacts* differ in their power source and relationship to the passage of time. A nail-gun is not powered by human muscle, but by electricity. Moreover, in Sterling's formulation, at a certain point in history, the utility of an *artifact* is no longer essential to the survival of a society. Individuals may still use *artifacts*, but when a *machine* has become essential to a society's productivity, the older object used to perform that same task becomes an *artifact* and is no longer essential.

Products are "widely distributed, commercially available objects, anonymously and uniformly manufactured in massive quantities, using planned division of labor, rapid, non-artisanal, assembly-line techniques, operating over continental economies of scale, and supported by highly reliable transportation, finance and information systems."⁵⁷ Under this definition, a *product* might function as an *artifact* or *machine* and is likely to have been produced by a *machine* or unskilled labor. *Gizmos* are "highly unstable, user-alterable, baroquely multi-featured objects, commonly programmable, with a brief life-span."⁵⁸ The obvious example here is a computer. This kind of technology might also be a *product*. But *gizmos* differ in that they are "commonly linked to network providers; they are not stand

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

alone objects but interfaces.”⁵⁹ This means that the object itself is a medium through which to interact with yet another form of technology. For example, an iPhone is a physical object used to connect to both wireless internet and cellphone networks.

Finally, *spimes* are a new technology imagined by Sterling. He defines *spimes* as “manufactured objects whose information support is so overwhelmingly extensive and rich that they are regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system.”⁶⁰ Sterling regards *spimes* as unique in that they “begin and end as data. They are designed on screens, fabricated by digital means, and precisely tracked through space and time throughout their earthly life span.”⁶¹ Though *spimes*, as he imagines them, have yet to be fully realized, Sterling cites certain forms of military technology as an example of an early stage of what he envisions will come later: “I would date the dawn of Spimes to 2004, when the United States Department of Defense suddenly demanded that its thousands of suppliers attach Radio Frequency ID Tags, or ‘arphids,’ to military supplies.”⁶² Radio Frequency ID Tags are physical objects carrying radio frequencies identifiable through GPS systems. What Sterling envisions in the future are objects that are essentially virtual. Even if a *spime* were to take physical form—such as an ID tag—its development, lifespan, and destruction could be recorded and stored entirely digitally.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 12.

Building Impossible Machines

Sterling's inclusion of *spimes* in his taxonomy of technology is especially useful to our conversation about AF because it represents a form of technology that does not *yet* exist. It is no surprise that Sterling is also an acclaimed SF writer because imagining new technology is a staple of a great number of SF narratives. Acclaimed theoretical physicist Michio Kaku claims an even closer relationship between the two, arguing that SF is essential to progressing scientific discovery in the real world. In his text, *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration into the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation, and Time Travel*, Kaku argues that impossibilities should be taken seriously as a subfield of study in Physics because pondering the frontier of the known universe is what leads to innovative scientific discovery.⁶³ Kaku cites several historical examples where what was once regarded as a scientific impossibility is proven possible in part thanks to allowing the imagination to run free. For example, Kaku recalls how in the 1930s, even Albert Einstein believed that the atomic bomb was an impossible achievement. It was only after the atomic physicist, Leo Szilard, remembered H. G. Wells's 1914 SF novel, *The World Set Free*, in which an atomic bomb is developed, that Szilard was inspired to perform a series of experiments that would lead to the Manhattan Project.⁶⁴

The atomic bomb was considered impossible in the early twentieth century, according to Kaku, because the basic laws of physics were not yet fully understood.⁶⁵ The

⁶³ Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration into the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation, and Time Travel* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), xiv.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁶⁵ Kaku notes that it was not until the early twentieth century that quantum physics was theorized. As a result, physicists discovered that different laws governed small scale entities such as atomic and subatomic

role of the imagination, or more accurately SF, is critical because it pushes designers and scientists alike to think beyond such worldly constraints and search hidden aspects of the universe where our knowledge is incomplete. Kaku argues that today, in the twenty-first century, the fundamental laws of physics and quantum physics are basically understood and, “as a result, physicists can state, with reasonable confidence, what the broad outlines of future technology might look like.”⁶⁶ Fully recognizing the significant role that the impossible and the imagination plays in the development of new technology, Kaku classifies three categories of impossible new technologies.

For Kaku, Class I impossibilities are technologies that are impossible today but do not violate the known laws of physics.⁶⁷ These technologies may indeed come to pass in the near future, perhaps even in the twenty-first century. According to Kaku, these technologies include “teleportation, antimatter engines, certain forms of telepathy, psychokinesis, and invisibility.”⁶⁸ Class II impossibilities are conceived on the fringe of what is known about the physical world. These technologies do not technically violate the fundamental laws of physics but if they are possible, they will be developed long after our offspring are deceased: “They might be realized on a scale of millennia to millions of years in the future.” These technologies include “time machines, the possibility of hyperspace travel, and travel through wormholes.”⁶⁹

particles than large scale entities such as planets. This discovery opened up a world of possibility for the design of technology previously thought impossible.

⁶⁶ Kaku, *Physics of the Impossible*, xvi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Finally, Class III Impossibilities violate the known laws of physics and if they do turn out to be possible in the future, it is because our understanding of the world has fundamentally shifted in a way that is difficult to perceive in our own time. Kaku states that this classification is significant “because so many technologies in science fiction are dismissed by scientists as being totally impossible, when what they really mean is that they are impossible for a primitive civilization like ours.”⁷⁰ According to Kaku, statements of impossibility should embrace two well established motifs in SF productions: aliens and future civilizations.⁷¹ Though many technologies are considered impossible for our present civilization, this does not necessarily mean that they are impossible for our own future civilization or civilizations in the universe other than our own. Indeed, seemingly impossible scientific developments, such as those one might find in a Robert Heinlein SF novel, have utility in the real world. For Kaku, impossibility is more than a signifier that marks hopeless impracticality. Rather, it is a theoretical convention—a tool—used to engender innovation.

Mapping the Imagination

In *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby argue that designers of technology are often limited not only by the laws of physics but also by socio-economic systems, which they articulate as the laws of civilization. Throughout this text, the two authors develop a design theory referred to as *conceptual design* that, much like Kaku’s classification system, embraces the impossible as a means to

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

push beyond a conventional understanding of reality to foster innovation. Before articulating this theoretical practice, Dunne and Raby establish four main socio-historical factors that restrict the social dreaming necessary to produce new design concepts.

First, after a short period of time in the 1960s and 1970s when design with a social or artistic focus was encouraged at several leading design studios around the world, by the 1980s design had become commercialized.⁷² Dunne and Raby argue that during this decade, the world saw the rise of a neo-liberal model of capitalism that encouraged designers to focus less on creative design concepts and more on economically viable design products.⁷³ Designers such as the Austrian-born Victor Papanek, who famously designed technologies with a safe ecological focus during the 1970s, became fewer and fewer because their projects were “out of sync with design’s potential to generate wealth.”⁷⁴

The second instance that heavily influenced design practices was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Dunne and Raby believe that when the Cold War ended, alternative models for society beyond capitalism ended as well. Without these models there were no political, social, or economic systems with which innovative design approaches could flourish. Anything that did not resonate with a capitalist system “was dismissed as fantasy, as unreal.”⁷⁵ Third, citing the Polish sociologist Zigmunt Bauman in his text, *Liquid Modernity*, Dunne and Raby argue that society has become more atomized. That is to say,

⁷² See Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 6.

6. Dunne and Raby refer to several design studios by name as exemplars of this trend including Archigram, Archizoom, Superstudio, Ant Farm, Haus-Rucker-Co, and Walter Pichler.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

society has come to embrace a philosophy of individualism where people are less inclined to design technologies that are meant to address the needs and desires of the most vulnerable. They insist that this form of individualism, while beneficial for entrepreneurship purposes, “minimizes the safety net and encourages everyone to look out for him- or herself.”⁷⁶

Finally, as the twentieth century ended, it became clearer that many of the technological and social advancements that were dreamed about as solutions to global problems were unsustainable. As the global population continues to grow beyond 7 billion, as natural resources begin to wane, as the effects of climate change become more evident, and as global financial systems crash such as in 2008, “a younger generation doesn’t dream, it hopes, it hopes that it will survive, that there will be water for all, that we will be able to feed everyone, that we will not destroy ourselves.”⁷⁷ The gloominess of this disposition described by Dunne and Raby has a direct effect on design culture because if people do not dream, it is difficult to design new technologies that will transform our present and our future.

With these four factors constantly gnawing at design’s potential, Dunne and Raby attempt to dream beyond present circumstances by embracing a freedom of thought they refer to as *conceptual design*: “Once designers step away from industrial production and the marketplace we enter the realm of the unreal, the fictional, or what we refer to as conceptual design—design about ideas.”⁷⁸ The notion of designing ideas is very important for these two

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 11.

authors because they believe ideas can be transformative. They argue that the fact that *conceptual design* embraces ideas rather than achievable realities does not diminish its ability to “pose questions, provoke, and inspire.”⁷⁹

In fact, Dunne and Raby’s theoretical practice treats the notion of an “idea” in a fashion quite similar to Platonic Forms. In *The Republic*, the ancient philosopher Plato argued that reality was split into two realms, the realm of the senses and that of Forms. Everything that is recognizable through the use of human sensory observation is but a reflection of a higher, abstract Form. Plato believed that studying Forms would provide insight into the realm of the senses. Citing an interview with the moral philosopher Susan Neiman, Dunne and Raby make a similar argument: “Ideals are not measured by whether they conform to reality; reality is judged by whether it lives up to ideals.”⁸⁰ As such, according to Dunne and Raby, *conceptual design*’s strength is that it designs ideals: “We are more interested in designing for how things could be. ... [Conceptual design] deals, by definition, with unreality.”⁸¹

In the second chapter of *Speculative Everything*, Dunne and Raby title the section where they theorize *conceptual design* the “Map of Unreality.” In this journey through the unreal, design is used to “form scenarios, often starting with a what-if question” to open a space marked by provocation and fiction.⁸² According to the two authors, the fictional nature of these spaces encourages designers to “suspend their disbelief and allow their

⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰ Susan Neiman, quoted in *ibid.*

⁸¹ Ibid., 12.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

imaginations to wander, to momentarily forget how things are now, and wonder how things could be.”⁸³ In this space, people have license to design technologies for the purposes of aesthetic and social value. The path a design takes is not restricted to the ebb and flow of the stock market, but rather is oftentimes in direct opposition to it. In this way, Dunne and Raby hope to bring dreaming back into what they characterize as a saturated field of design.

SF Reading Protocols

Sterling, Kaku, and Dunne and Raby all suggest that fiction, particularly SF, plays an important role in the development of new technology and social innovation. For this reason, it is important to garner a more substantive understanding of the linguistic, aesthetic, and philosophical methods SF uses to create new worlds and technologies. One of the most prominent writers in SF is Samuel R. Delany. In long and short form essays collected in three texts—*The Jewel Hinged Jaw*, *The Starboard Wine*, and *The American Shore*—he records his thoughts on SF. Though he never outlines a singular theory, he does develop a series of dialogues that, if read together, speak to how SF forms distinct language patterns and world-building techniques. These dialogues are often credited as Delany’s Reading Protocols, imply that a SF story might be read with greater understanding if adhered to. A review of Delany’s Reading Protocols will shed light on several themes related to the design theories previously discussed and provide the foundation for my own AF Reading Protocols.

⁸³ Ibid.

The Corrective Image Process

In *Speculative Everything*, Dunne and Raby review several conceptual designs with odd sounding names and provide their images for the reader to analyze. Examples include *The Huggable Atomic Mushroom*,⁸⁴ *Flypaper Robotic Clock*,⁸⁵ and the *El Camino Lightning Harvester*.⁸⁶ Even with the descriptions the coauthors provide, it is difficult to grasp how these designs would function in real life. Dunne and Raby would argue this is the result of the socio-historical barriers articulated earlier that hinder design's potential and, consequently, an individual's ability to dream. In the *Jewel Hinged Jaw*, Delany provides a more sophisticated answer that speaks to the context in which information is received. Without proper context, a *conceptual design*, an idea, an image, or even a single word can appear unintelligible. In his text, Delany examines this interruption in meaning and provides an explanation for how SF, using language, offers a unique context in which often unintelligible concepts are rendered intelligible.

⁸⁴ See Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 42. *The Huggable Atomic Mushroom* was designed by Dunne and Raby along with Michael Anastassiades and exhibited in 2004–05 as part of a series titled *Designs for Fragile Personalities and Anxious Times*. The atomic mushroom models are made of soft cloth and vary in size from small to large in similar fashion to stuffed animals. The purpose of the objects is to enable the viewer to become comfortable engaging a harmless, even cute, object while also appreciating the danger it represents.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 50. *The Flypaper Robotic Clock* was designed by Auger-Loizeau and exhibited in 2009 as part of a series titled *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots*. The technology is designed to consume insects and convert their organic energy into microbial fuel cells that can in turn be used to power domestic robots, such as a clocks.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 85. *The Model of a Chevrolet El Camino Lightning Harvester Modification* was designed by Sascha Pohflepp and was exhibited in 2009 as part of *The Golden Institute* series. The series imagines technologies that might exist in an alternate reality in which Jimmy Carter defeated Ronald Reagan in the 1981 election. In this world, Carter uses his presidential power to fund groundbreaking new environmentally friendly energy technologies.

Delany writes at length about how SF is distinct from what he deems mundane fiction, or mainstream literature.⁸⁷ To understand this distinction, Delany begins this text with an introduction to his own brand of semiotics. By framing narratives as series of words in relationship with each other, Delany outlines how stories adhere to particular structures or organizational rules that enable readers to form different kinds of images in their mind: “The story is what happens in the reader’s mind as his eyes move from the first word to the second, the second to the third, and so on to the end of the tale.”⁸⁸ To illustrate this point visually, Delany describes how in cinema thousands of images follow one another chronologically to simulate a reality. Conversely, as a person reads a story, there is no chronological relationship between the words; instead, “they sit in numerous inter- and overweaving relations. The process, as we move our eyes from word to word, is corrective and revisionary rather than progressive. Each new word revises the complex picture we had a moment before.”⁸⁹

Delany provides an example starting with the word “Dog.” The word dog by itself evokes an image in a reader or listener’s mind, yet that image by itself can mean myriad different things literally and metaphorically. Ultimately, this image may have little to do with what the word was originally meant to communicate. Adhering to Delany’s theory, by adding another word to “dog” the image is qualified or corrected by the relationship that has been formed between the two words. Yet the word added cannot be just any word,

⁸⁷ Samuel R. Delaney, *The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), x.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

otherwise the relationship would not make sense to the receiver: “*Collie dog*, and you will agree. I can correct it into being *big dog* or *a shaggy dog*, and you will still concur. But *Chevrolet Dog*? An *oxymoronic dog*? A *turgidly cardiac dog*?”⁹⁰ Delany states that for the purposes of normal speech or naturalistic fiction, the relationships formed by *oxymoronic* and *dog* are, perhaps, outside the realm of intelligibility in that “They distort in much too unusual a way the various images we have attached to the sound ‘dog.’” Through this example, Delany illuminates the corrective image process that informs every novel: “A sixty-thousand word novel is one picture corrected fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine times.”⁹¹

Chevrolet Dog may not evoke any images that make sense in normal day-to-day communication or in a newspaper article, but Delany argues this is because the rules that dictate the relationship between words in these arenas are constrictive. For example, a *turgidly cardiac dog* may make perfect sense in a SF tale because it “expands the freedom of the choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully; but it limits the way we employ the corrective process as we move between them.”⁹² Elaborating on this concept, Delany introduces four categories of subjunctivity that demonstrate the difference between “word series” or forms of writing and the freedom of word choice associated with each one.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 11.

Subjunctive Categories

Delany's series of categories begins with *Reportage*. For Delany, reportage is characterized by "a blanket indicative tension (or mood) [that] informs the whole series: *this happened*."⁹³ For example, when a person reads a newspaper article that details the events from the day before, the reader recognizes this series of words as reporting on events that have transpired in reality. For *Naturalistic Fiction*, Delany states that this series of words is characterized by a subjunctivity level: *could have happened*.⁹⁴ For Delany the difference between these two word series is that *Naturalistic Fiction* allows for certain freedoms in language choice that *Reportage* does not: "Consider the word series: 'For one second, as she stood alone on the desert, her world shattered and she watched fragments bury themselves in the dunes.'"⁹⁵ According to Delany, this phrase holds no meaning in *Reportage* because the description paints outside the realm of reality. Contrarily, in *Naturalistic Fiction*, such use of metaphor might be considered genius.

Next, Delany describes *Fantasy* as marked by the subjunctive characterization: *could not have happened*. He goes on to state that, "at the appearance of elves, witches, or magic in a nonmetaphorical position, or at some correction of image too bizarre to be explained by other than supernatural," the reader has entered the realm of fantasy.⁹⁶ As soon as creations such as *unicorns* appear in a narrative, Delany argues that words of this kind effect every other word in the sentence as well as the larger narrative. The rest of a story may be

⁹³ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

incredibly realistic in its descriptions of space, objects, and events, but once the fantastical element has been introduced, all other words are read in relationship to this element. Delany describes this operation as an infection that permeates through what might have otherwise been considered *Naturalistic Fiction*.⁹⁷ The distinction is characterized by how fantasy elements are understood in the context of a word series. In *Naturalistic Fiction*, the “unicorn” must be a metaphor or pertain to a specific instance that can be explained clearly to the reader or else risk unintelligibility. In fantasy, the “unicorn” signifies that the reader has been transported to a new reality altogether where “unicorns” exist without need for further explanation.

Yet, in SF something very special occurs. Realistic settings, metaphorical imagery, and fanciful creatures meet in a word series marked by the designation: *have not happened*. Delany argues that events that *have not happened* are split into several subcategories of subjunctivity: *might happen*, *will not happen*, *have not happened yet*, and *have not happened in the past*. Events that *might happen* “are your technological and sociological predictive tales,” events that *will not happen* “are your science-fantasy stories,” *events that have not happened yet* “are your cautionary dystopias,” and *events that have not happened in the past* comprise “that SF specialty, the parallel world story.”⁹⁸

As stated earlier, Delany argues that SF expands our freedom of choice as it relates to the words that can be included in a word series because of its subjunctive level. This is demonstrated by analyzing a sentence such as: *The red sun is high, the blue low*. Delany

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

argues that in *Naturalistic Fiction*, this sentence is meaningless because “our corrections in our images must be made in accordance with what we know of the personally observable—this includes our own observations or others’ that have been reported to us at the subjunctive level of journalism.”⁹⁹ Though in the personally observable world, we can perceive a high red(ish) sun, it is impossible to observe a second sun, let alone a blue one. Delany argues that in fantasy narratives this phrase makes more sense but the corrective process is restricted to the conventions of the world as contained in the narrative itself. Because there are not two suns in the personally observable world, as readers, “we must accept any pseudo-explanation we are given,” or allow for the meaning of the phrase to remain mysterious because the phenomenon is not observable.¹⁰⁰

Delany writes that *the red sun is high, the blue low*, unlike in *Naturalistic Fiction* or in *Fantasy*, takes on considerable meaning in SF because its subjunctive level “says that we must make our correction process in accord with what we know of the physically explainable universe.”¹⁰¹ Thus, in SF we are not required to rely solely on the personally observable or verifiable but are free to interpret the phrase, *the red sun is high, the blue low*, based on the realm of possible explanations available that are in accord with the physical scientific and philosophical laws of the universe. In this way, Delany’s explanation of SF and subjunctive categories intersects with Kaku’s first two classes of impossibilities and Sterling’s notion of *Spimes*. Both Kaku and Sterling offer categories of designed objects

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

based on the imagination. Yet, for both authors as well as Delany, something that is fictional need not always be considered a fantasy.

Delany's use of the corrective image process and subjunctive categories demonstrates how the language of SF allows for "the most violent leaps of imagery" and shows how as the reader is thrown into new environments, "worlds away, it specifies how we got there."¹⁰² With this in mind, Delany explains how particular designed objects, such as those referenced by Dunne and Raby, might be rendered intelligible in a SF space. For many of the conceptual designs mentioned in their book to appear feasible, the reader must abandon the assumed subjunctive stance of *Reportage* associated with most academic texts and approach *Speculative Everything* from the subjunctive level associated with SF—*have not happened*. Still, for any SF word series to work, Delany argues, three interrelated semiotic dialogues must be recognized.

Trivalent Structure

Though the planets, situations, and people in a SF narrative may appear worlds away, Delany suggests that there is always a profound relationship to our present world embedded within the structure of the story itself. In *The American Shore* he states: "science fiction is not about the future. It uses the future as a convention to present a significant distortion of the present."¹⁰³ This statement purports that to engage and analyze the structure of SF narratives, one must thoroughly investigate the present. Delany terms this

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Samuel R. Delany, *The American Shore: Meditations on a Tale of Science Fiction by Thomas M. Disch—“Angouleme”* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 36.

present “mundane fiction.” For Delany, mundane fiction is a form of narrative that reflects the rules and conventions of the Given World or the lived experience of the reader.¹⁰⁴ Upon reading a piece of mundane fiction, a reader is thrust into a discourse between their own Given World and the setting of the novel which is derivative of that world.

In addition to being a distortion of the present, Delany contends that “Science Fiction can be seen as epistemologically ordered, informed, and redeemed surrealism—if we believe in the fiction of the surreal.”¹⁰⁵ In this formulation SF in conversation with a “given” present from which a reader engages a text as well as a potentially surrealistic moment. Often, in everyday life, a distinction is made between the Given World and the world of the surreal. After all, it is difficult to live a normal life in society abiding by the surrealistic conventions of a Salvador Dali painting. Delany argues that as SF navigates this terrain between “given” and “surreal” worlds, it becomes clear that the two modes are not necessarily distinct conceptualizations.

In *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley quote the famous English surrealist, David Gascoyne, who says of the Surrealist Group in 1936: “It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real,’ the unconscious and the

¹⁰⁴ Delany refers to mundane fiction in several different texts. In the preface to *The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), x, he classifies mundane fiction as “fiction that is neither science nor speculative.”

¹⁰⁵ Delany, *The American Shore*, 36.

conscious.”¹⁰⁶ Rosemont and Kelley go on to explain how surrealism does not seek to espouse an unreality but rather “signifies *more* reality, and an expanded *awareness* of reality, including aspects and elements of the real that are ordinarily overlooked.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, when Delany speaks of the present in *The American Shore*, he refers to a present marked by realism *and* surrealism in similar fashion to the way it is discussed in *Black, Brown and Beige*. That is to say, the separation between the two is an arbitrary line drawn in our daily lives in order to structure our waking hours. Those who are unable to abide by this separation are often either considered incredible artists, such as those featured in Rosemont and Kelley’s text, or simply mad.

Delany explains how this relationship between realism and surrealism is relevant to our discussion on SF: “Before the world, realism and, by extension, surrealism are mute. They face the world with mere gesture—of acquiescence on the one hand and defiance on the other.”¹⁰⁸ Delany’s framing suggests that either people adhere to the realm of the “real” world or they defy it by choosing to live in a surreal one. These are the options presented to us in the present. Likewise, in mundane fiction, “there is only the steady drone of the world’s discourse, informing the text with meaning.”¹⁰⁹ Mundane fiction gets its meaning from an insular dialogue between the fictional narrative and the present “reality” on which it is based. In SF a significant distortion of the present—perhaps even a surreal one—forms a dialogue between the reader’s lived experience and a new world entirely. In mundane

¹⁰⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont, “Introduction,” in *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, eds., Robin D. G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Delany, *The American Shore*, 48.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

fiction, lacking this distortion, there is no such dialogue: “The didactic reduction of both realism and surrealism is always one modulation or another of the message, ‘Things as they are—social reality—will endure.’”¹¹⁰

Delany argues that the inward discourse of mundane fiction reflects the world of the reader and is therefore “restricted to two subjects: slavery or madness.”¹¹¹ This thematic binary, again, represents the two modes of our relationship to the present—we either acquiesce to the socially acceptable norm of the real or we live free in the surreal. Delany’s text proposes that this is a false binary that SF exposes through distortion—clearly there is more to life than these two options. Like mundane fiction, SF fashions an inward discourse to create a *Subject* that includes characters, plots, and themes. Additionally, SF “speaks outward to create a world, a world in dialogue with the real. And, of course, the real world speaks inward to construct its dialogue with both.”¹¹² This discourse between the Subject, Object, and the Given World creates a trivalent structure that is at the heart of SF. Delany states: “As there are three different discourses involved, there is really no way any two of the three can be congruent, or even complimentary, to the other. At best, the s-f writer harmonizes them.”¹¹³

The harmony that resonates from the trivalent structure of a SF story creates a sense of mysticism that, for Delany, is essential for a SF story to function as an effective word series: “In science fiction, the space of resonance for the mystical is constituted of the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

richness, resonance and harmony of the three discourses.”¹¹⁴ Delany argues that none of the discourses by themselves can possibly represent the meaning attributed to the other two and that they need each other in order to create a story that travels through the realms of the diegesis, the Given World, and the surreal equally. In *The Delany Intersection*, critic George Edgar Slusser states that Delany embraces the mysticism that accompanies these interrelated discourses because it blurs the lines between real and unreal, fact and fiction.¹¹⁵ Unlike in mundane fiction where truly imaginative creations are recast as metaphors or offshoots of the subconscious, Delany’s SF Reading Protocols function as a set of tools that enable a reader to enter a space where the conventionally impossible has the potential to bleed into a reader’s present if just for a brief spell.

AF Reading Protocols

Delany’s reading protocols are useful when analyzing the distinctions between SF and mundane fiction. But, how do we begin to distinguish between AF and SF such that AF might have its own apparatus for fruitful interpretation? The first step is to understand the motivations behind Delany’s texts. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, when Delany produced his major works on SF, he was writing with the purpose of establishing SF as its own genre worthy of thoughtful critique. In *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, *The Starboard Wine*, and *The American Shore* alike, he argues that SF has been unfairly marginalized in the realm of English and literary studies. Though he clearly relishes a certain creative freedom that is more readily accessible in marginal spaces, he takes issue with the lack of respect given to

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ George Edgar Slusser, *The Delany Intersection* (Los Angeles, CA: Borgo Press, 1977), 5.

SF writers who, according to him, have worked for years to establish a method of storytelling that opens up a world of possibilities for the imagination and critical thinking. His answer to this disrespect is to painstakingly establish a set of reading protocols such that readers and educators can gain a better understanding of how SF linguistically and methodologically differs from mundane fiction.

Since 1994, theorists in AF have taken a similar stance suggesting that AF is not SF but rather it uses the language of SF to address specific concerns related to racial injustice.¹¹⁶ Likewise, if AF is different than SF, then it stands to reason that it too should have its own set of reading protocols such that people might have a more complex understanding of how its stories are told and why. I argue that AF is distinct from SF in that its main objective is to critique a white heteronormative foundation of the Given World through the forging of designed objects or technologies. Moreover, these designed objects, created using the language of SF, are rhetorical objects that might be used to address racial inequality in both the real and surreal worlds. The manner in which this process functions is more clearly understood by returning to Delany's trivalent discourse between the Object, Subject, and The Given World.

Object—Traveling in Black Universes

Thus far in this chapter, I have described how design theory and SF theory construct fictional worlds. However, the theories reviewed present methods to create these worlds

¹¹⁶ As noted in the introduction, 1994 marks the year when British cultural critic, Mark Dery, first used the term AF in his text, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, to discuss black engagement with technoculture.

void of their political implications. In *Astrofuturism: Science, Race and Visions of Utopia in Space*, De Witt Douglas Kilgore provides an in depth analysis of how SF and the technologies imagined within its many narratives are host to the same race, gender, and sexuality biases as the real world. Kilgore makes this assertion following an investigation of novels produced by a collection of authors associated with SF and popular science during the 1950s he refers to as the Astrofuturists.¹¹⁷ These writers played a significant role in swaying public opinion in the United States to support technological advancements that would lead to space travel through the creation of what critic David Kirby refers to as diegetic prototypes—fictional depictions of future technologies that “demonstrate to large public audiences a technology’s utility, harmlessness, and viability.”¹¹⁸

Kilgore argues that Astrofuturist authors—such as Wernher von Braun, Willy Ley, and Robert Heinlein—inspired real life space travel by writing stories rendering future settlements on other planets as achievable utopias. According to Kilgore, post–World War II America found itself a world leader in technology and economy. Despite this success, “the posture of confidence assumed by the United States in the international arena was accompanied, and perhaps in part occasioned, by the nation’s internal confidence.”¹¹⁹ Kilgore describes how despite all of America’s wealth and power, the country “harbored a political culture that mandated the unequal distribution of civil rights.”¹²⁰ Astrofuturists offered future narratives based in faraway planets that promised to solve these issues of

¹¹⁷ De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

¹¹⁸ David Kirby, *Lab Coats in Hollywood: Science, Scientists, and Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 195.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

racial inequality: “Their space frontiers promised to extend the reach of the human species and to heal its historic wounds.”¹²¹

Contrary to this promise, Kilgore’s research into writers such as David Lasser, Arthur C. Clarke, and Ben Bova revealed that these utopic futures, authored exclusively by white men, recast America’s imperialist history in space such that images of racial diversity in the future re-inscribed racial stereotypes onto the imagined futures and the space race itself, rather than solve this historical wound: “Astrofuturism becomes part of a cover deflecting attention from America’s treatment of its racialized minorities and safeguarding the white nation’s status as inheritor of Europe’s colonial mantle and its standing as the vanguard of technological modernity.”¹²² Kilgore discovered that the social fabric of these stories develops at a much slower pace than the technological advances. Therefore, the worlds in these novels are centered on primarily heteronormative white male protagonists, often in conflict with more primitive or alien people of color.

As a result, Kilgore argues, the real future ushered in by actual space travel barely includes people of other races at all: “The exclusion of women and racial minorities from the pioneering astronauts corps of the 1950s and the 1960s was a deliberate gesture whose significance was readily apparent: the segregations of contemporary American life were to be excluded into the space future.”¹²³ AF, as a discourse, encompasses far more than simply placing black people into narratives about the future. Instead, AF addresses the problem outlined in Kilgore’s text by acknowledging that, historically, when imagined future spaces

¹²¹ Ibid., 9.

¹²² Ibid., 223.

¹²³ Ibid.

and technology intersect as they do in Astrofuturism, these new worlds tend to not only exclude marginalized groups from entering, but also from enjoying the benefits of the new technologies invented there. AF recognizes that any “Map of Unreality,” such as the one proposed by Dunne and Raby, is a politicized space. Thus, when Afrofuturist artists considers the future, they pointedly design what Adilifu Nama refers to as Black Space.¹²⁴

Kilgore demonstrates that even when SF is depicted as apolitical this is never the case because authors bring their biases with them as they fashion new realities. Delany argues that the analysis of a SF story’s Object—the imagined space in which the plot takes place—and how it differs from the real world helps a reader glean a richer experience from the text. Using AF reading protocols, I argue the same holds true for understanding how and why a particular technology within a narrative is used. In AF texts, race is essential to the narrative’s landscape both literally and thematically. Thus, using AF reading protocols, the operative questions used for analysis of the Object are: *What is the relationship in the narrative between race and the physical terrain? How does race function as part of the story’s sociopolitical system?* These questions are pertinent because they demonstrate how AF reveals the hidden racial politics that are present within the very foundation of any SF world.

¹²⁴ In his text, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), Nama writes specifically about the role that black authorship plays in SF cinema. In this context, he argues that the black imagination, or black space, provides alternative sites of political resistance for black people. It does this by providing counter narratives that work to undermine and challenge predominant negative racial discourses (9).

Subject—Forging Black Tools

Just as with the settings of SF worlds, the diegetic prototypes are also often infused with racial bias. In the future worlds created in Astrofuturist texts, the protagonists were usually white men. Likewise, the new and innovative technologies that animate these stories are disproportionately invented by and ultimately used by white men. Unfortunately, this inequity mirrors how access to technology is distributed in the real world. In *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, co-editors Alicia Headlam Hines, Alondra Nelson, and Thuy Linh N. Tu and discuss how technology is often framed in media, education, and a host of other critical spaces as the domain of white men: “narrators of the information revolution have regaled us with tales of hackers and geeks, and in the process have constructed technology as a site of white male superiority.”¹²⁵ They explain how this framing often effects people of color in that they do not receive the same access to technology as white men because of this stereotype. This component of their argument resembles Kilgore’s conclusions regarding Astrofuturism.

However, the co-editors part from theorists like Kilgore by interrogating what interaction with technology looks like beyond the stereotypes. Their main argument in the introduction to *Technicolor* is that people of color have been engaging with technology all along. Yet when such engagement takes place, audiences fail to recognize it. One of the objectives of *Technicolor* is to reimagine our collective picture of what it looks like to engage with technology so that it includes people of color as well. At present, the co-editors suggest

¹²⁵ Alicia Headlam Hines, Alondra Nelson, and Thuy Linh N. Tu, “Introduction,” in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, eds., Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

that “most often when attention is turned to the implications of race for theorizing technology, people of color are cast as victims.”¹²⁶ This framing usually highlights their “economic and educational constraints, cultural priorities, or their own fiscal irresponsibility.”¹²⁷ For the editors, the danger of connecting race to technology in this way is that these stereotypes tend to become rationalizations for the exclusion of people of color from technoculture: “After all, if people of color are seen only as victims, then there is very little reason to entrust them with the tools of the future.”¹²⁸

To counteract the cultural lens that represents people of color as victims, the editors selected a set of essays that examine how racial and ethnic minorities interact with technology in their everyday lives. To accomplish this, they broaden the traditional definition of technology “to include not only those thought to create revolutions (e.g., information technologies), but also those with which people come in contact with” daily.¹²⁹ Thus, in *Technicolor*, the main distinction is not the technology itself, but rather how and why it is used. The text argues that people of color have a long and complex relationship with technology that is intertwined with racial discrimination.¹³⁰ This relationship is so strong that race even seeps into how a technology is appropriated by its users: “While we refuse essentialisms (i.e., the idea that people of color inherently use technologies differently than the majority), we do recognize that individuals and communities employ technologies for very specific goals.”¹³¹ These specific goals are often tied to the history and social location

¹²⁶ Ibid., 3

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹³¹ Ibid., 5.

of its users and therefore, when they use technology in their everyday lives, they do so to “address historical exclusions and continuing inequalities—sometimes to offer more democratic alternatives, other times to manufacture profit, most often simply to fill a need.”¹³²

Expanding on *Technicolor*'s thesis regarding appropriation, In *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Kodwo Eshun argues that many of the most profound appropriations of technology by black people can be found in black music. Eshun surveys many different forms of black music including Jazz, Soul, Funk, Rap, and Techno, assessing how black people have used music as an experimental space to create the technologies of the future. Eshun argues that popular scholars and critics of black music have ignored the important “intersections of sound and science fiction—the nexus this project terms Sonic Fiction or PhonoFiction.”¹³³ Eshun's suggestion that black musicians engage with technology all of the time, but that this engagement is often overlooked mirrors the argument about technology in *Technicolor*.

Eshun's assertion is most convincing when he describes the origins of rap music and the technical side of producing beats for songs. According to Eshun, one of the most innovative appropriations of technology to come from hip hop is the isolation of the breakbeat or what he terms *breakbeat science*. Eshun describes *breakbeat science* as the musical operation performed by artists such as, Grandmaster Flash and DJ Kool Herc “when they literally go to the moment of a record where the melody and the harmony drops

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), -002.

away and where the beats and the drum and the bass moves forward.”¹³⁴ He states that this isolation of the beat switches on an electricity “by making the beat portable, by extracting the beat”¹³⁵ Eshun describes how after the breakbeat has been isolated, a DJ is then free to animate the track with other sounds of their choosing.

Fascinated by this discovery, Eshun compares the isolation of the breakbeat to motion capture in film. In film, motion capture is when the movements of a human being are monitored with electronic sensors to capture unique human mobility and character traits. Once the motions have been mapped out digitally, these human gestures are free to be animated visually anyway the film technician sees fit. This technology is considered one of the most significant advances in film. Eshun’s juxtaposition of hip hop’s *breakbeat science* and film’s motion capture accurately depicts the prejudice inherent in our discourse on technology. As Eshun keenly points out, while a film editor using motion capture is recognized as interacting with technology to make a film, a DJ isolating the breakbeat is not. The black DJ is not acknowledged for his or her contribution to techno-culture in part because he or she appropriates the given technology of the turntable and vinyl differently than it was originally intended. And yet, “by materializing [the breakbeat as] ... a portion of the vinyl that could be repeated,” Grandmaster Flash and others invented one of the most influential musical technologies for a generation of listeners, commonly referred to as “scratchin.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Ibid., 176.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Earlier in the chapter, I reviewed how Sterling and Kaku's texts offer informative explanations for the kinds of technologies that already exist and the others that have yet to be realized. But neither theorist discusses who gets to use these technologies if and when they are ever created. While Delany's discourse on the Subject focuses on the characters and their narrative arches, in AF, the diegetic prototype is just as significant. Thus, in AF reading protocols, the Subject is interpreted from a different perspective. In the following chapters our analysis of the Subject is focused on the narrative arc of the technology central to the story. The operative questions here are: *How does this technology work? How was it developed? Who uses this technology?*

The Given World—Bringing Black Tools to Life

Dunne and Raby's discussion of *conceptual design* fuses the notion of design as a scientific practice with design that has resonance within the arts and social sciences. They argue that the field of design has become too far removed from its relationship to the wellbeing of people. They offer *conceptual design* to help reconnect it. Where their notion of design prescribes a very general description of how this might be accomplished through the design of "ideas" or "ideals," Carl DiSalvo's text, *Adversarial Design*, envisions a manner in which the field of design might be interpreted as a liberal arts practice. In the process of conceptualizing his theory of *adversarial design*, he also describes how these design ideas, such as those described by Dunne and Raby, might function to disrupt some of the Given World's more restrictive practices through the use of agonism.

Unlike Sterling, Kaku, or Dunne and Raby, DiSalvo offers a robust definition of what he means by design. He acknowledges that design theory often adheres to a scientific

method based on experimentation and the empirical study of the outcomes.¹³⁷ While there are certainly benefits to this approach, DiSalvo advocates for a different view of the design process as a form of rhetoric. Citing the work of design studies scholar Richard Buchanan, DiSalvo seeks to cast design as “a contemporary form of rhetoric, its concern being the communication of belief and the incitement to action through argument.”¹³⁸ As such, designers might be recognized less as engineers or scientists and more as “agents of rhetorical thinking” whose work, both “digital and analog, tangible and intangible,” functions as an argument about how we should live our lives.¹³⁹ Thus, according to DiSalvo, it is imperative that scholars of design look to the entities produced not as simply inanimate objects, or generalized ideas, but rather as pointed articulations about our present and future.

Following this recalibration of how we perceive the field of design, DiSalvo offers three general characteristics of the design process. First, design is not just for designers. DiSalvo argues that though there is the profession of design and the study of design, these are not the only people that participate in design culture. Rather, writers, musicians, or visual artists could be regarded as designers because they use their talents to create innovative products, services, and experiences to shape their surrounding environment.¹⁴⁰

Second, design is a normative process.¹⁴¹ To design something is to conceive of how the world could or should be different somehow. Thus design is, by DiSalvo’s definition, an

¹³⁷ Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 15.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴¹ In this context, DiSalvo uses the term normative as it is used in the field of Philosophy. He is concerned primarily with how design might be used to better understand ethical and moral decision making.

activity closely aligned with SF practices. As stated in the introduction by Samuel R. Delany, SF is not about the future so much as it is a critical distortion of the present. The future is a convention used to see our present circumstances the way they could be if something were changed. According to DiSalvo, “claiming and asserting that things should be other than they are and attempting to produce the means to achieve that change are not neutral activities.”¹⁴² Contrarily, design is subject to moral, ethical, and political criticism which further solidifies its place in the realm of liberal arts dialogues.

Third, the design process is not only theoretical, but it is also experiential. Any product that is designed evokes an experience that is accompanied by all of the moral, ethical, and political issues mentioned earlier. DiSalvo argues that design gives form to these often contentious positions allowing for people to interact with ideas that might otherwise remain in the realm of theory: “This practice of design is an implicitly normative endeavor of conceiving and producing experiential forms—artifacts, systems, events—to shape beliefs and courses of action.”¹⁴³ Thus, DiSalvo argues that design objects might act as signifiers for socio-political discourse, much the same way a word or a sentence signifies particular meanings. Just as Delany offers a new framework for analyzing word series, DiSalvo attempts to offer a new way for interpreting design products. These three general characteristics of design provide the foundation for DiSalvo’s theory of *adversarial design*. The main distinction that DiSalvo seeks to carve out for his own design practice is that

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 17.

adversarial design is concerned specifically with producing experiential forms used to shape beliefs and courses of action about political issues.

In theorizing *adversarial design*, DiSalvo introduces two additional qualities—it is both agonistic and political. Agonism is “a condition of disagreement and confrontation—a condition of contestation and dissensus.”¹⁴⁴ Returning to DiSalvo’s assertion that design might be studied as a form of rhetoric, his thoughts on agonism suggest that *adversarial design* does not just pose an argument but is also meant to oppose and to provoke. In addition, *adversarial design* is political. In his text, DiSalvo spends considerable time distinguishing between design for politics and political design. He argues that politics “are a *means* by which an organization, municipality, or state is put together.”¹⁴⁵ Politics, according to DiSalvo, is the system that organizes us and therefore design for politics encompasses projects that are meant to support or fix specific problems related to the system that is in place. In contrast, the political is “a *condition* of life—a condition of ongoing contest between forces and ideals.”¹⁴⁶ This political condition takes form in many ways including debate, dissensus, and protest. For DiSalvo, *adversarial design* produces objects and experiences that challenge power structures, open up space for contestation, and allow for the development of innovative solutions and cultural practices.¹⁴⁷

Delany argues that the Given World, the world of the reader, is in conversation with both the Object and the Subject simultaneously. Therefore, when we engage a piece of AF,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

a dialogue is created with both the world of the fictional narrative and the technology produced within that narrative, both of which reference the Given World. Likewise, as we consider AF reading protocols, it is imperative to acknowledge that the technologies produced within these narratives are not only infused with political implications for the story, but for the real world as well. Taking our cue from DiSalvo, we must consider what these technologies signify rhetorically. For AF reading protocols, the operative questions pertaining to the Given World are: *What political issue does this technology address in the fictional narrative? What real world political issue does this technology bring attention to? How might this technology be appropriated to address that issue?*

Designing Black Space

In the following chapters, I engage in close readings of Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, Octavia Butler's *Parable* novel series, and Sun Ra's film *Space is the Place*. These three artists are among the most prominent names in the discourse on AF because of their prolific contributions to their fields as well as their innovative approaches to addressing the Given World's intersecting inequalities of race, gender, and sexuality. Following these chapters, I conclude with an examination of an under-researched arena, graphics novels, where several artists are making cutting-edge contributions to the discourse of AF. The creators examined in this final chapter are the co-designers of the *Black Kirby* universe, John Jennings and Stacey Robinson.

In this study, I argue that as these artists develop their narratives, they do so to critique and distort a present technoculture heavily influenced by a notion of futurity immersed in furthering social inequality. An analysis of the trivalent discourse between the

Object, Subject, and Given World in these works of art will demonstrate how AF is both a philosophy as well as an aesthetic. This claim asserts that AF Reading Protocols can be used as both a methodology to produce AF work as well as a way to read texts not associated with AF through an Afrofuturistic lens. In the process, AF provides a fresh approach to contemporary design theory, where alternative technologies, both material and immaterial, might be forged in fictional realities for the purpose of addressing real world concerns that affect black people.

Mining the Modular Calculus:

Searching for Liberation Models in Samuel R. Delany's *Nowhere*

Afrofuturism mines Science Fiction for new technologies that can be used to form fissures in the constrictive boundary that encapsulates the Given World. The identification of these diegetic prototypes are perhaps AF's most significant undertaking as these are the tools that are used to liberate people searching for portals to new horizons...

—Old Afrofuturist Proverb

As Afrofuturism gains more popularity around the globe, scholars continue to question the parameters that encompass what it is and how it can lead to some form of liberation for black people. After decades of debate this cultural phenomenon still eludes simple definition. One question that continues to drive this investigation asks: *Is Afrofuturism a social movement, an aesthetic, or some combination of both?* Most scholars and practitioners of AF argue that it is an arts movement with profound social objectives. If this is the case, then this claim should inform how we approach researching AF's development. For scholarly purposes, it is not enough to simply state that AF leads to liberation for black people; we must investigate if, how, and why it does so. It is also necessary to establish what liberation means in the context of AF. Furthermore, when discussing social movements, the models we employ to describe their mechanics become increasingly significant as they are used to interpret the development of critical responses to historical injustice.

In this chapter, I interrogate AF through the lens of Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Both models engage the interrelated concepts of time and space differently while endorsing unique paths towards the development of a black insurgency. In accordance with each model, I introduce aspects of a diegetic prototype called the Modular Calculus that is referenced in several of Samuel R. Delany's novels including *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) and *Tales of Nevèryon* (1979). I use the Modular Calculus to further analyze each model and, in the process, demonstrate how practitioners of AF negotiate the relationship between time and space in their approach to achieving black liberation.

Given World: The Political Process Model

How do we account for social progress? For the emergence of revolution? If one group is oppressed by another group how, when, and why do they fight back? Versions of social progress unfold in myriad variations in SF films such as *The Matrix* (1998). As the film's protagonist, Neo, performs action packed maneuvers such as stopping bullets with his mind, it is easy to overlook that the entire conflict between man and machine that animates the film is essentially a slave revolt—and an unsuccessful one at that. The plot of the trilogy that included this groundbreaking film reveals that humans of the future have been enslaved by the very artificial intelligence that they created. Neo—humanity's savior—is endowed with special gifts that allow him to break a few more people out of bondage each

film until he finally sacrifices his own life for the cause in the final iteration of the franchise, *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003).¹⁴⁸

As with most good SF tales, *The Matrix* series transpires in the middle of an epic war. The audience only learns of the generations of lives already lost to the conflict through stories told by survivors. There is no detailed account in the films of *how* the human insurgency got started to begin with. Even if there were such an account, could we trust its depiction as a reasonable representation of how social movements work? These are the kinds of questions Samuel R. Delany poses in his fiction pertaining to his diegetic archetype, the Modular Calculus. How, Delany asks, do we determine whether a model represents something? Moreover, if we do determine that a model represents something, how do we establish whether it is an accurate representation?

These questions are significant to Delany because of his view, as articulated in the previous chapter, that SF is a critical distortion of the present. A SF story is only relevant to the reader if it constructs a model of society that resonates with the Given World. Otherwise, it becomes too difficult for the reader to relate to the narrative. Delany and other artists associated with AF argue that the same is true in scholarship. In social movement theory, scholars have developed models for explaining the development of social insurgency. But some theories develop more widely accepted representations than others, and problems occur when incomplete or inaccurate models are valued as standards for interpretation. In the context of social movement theory, an incomplete or inaccurate

¹⁴⁸ In the English language, Neo also means “new” and contains the same letters as the number “one.”

model can leave out significant contributions to history in a fashion similar to a SF story that begins its narrative in the middle of a social conflict.

In *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, Doug McAdam introduces a new social movement theory to account for the development of black insurgency that led to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. He develops this theory, the Political Process model, because he believes the traditional models of social movement theory are too narrow in scope and leave valuable information about how social movements actually develop and decline unaccounted for. He takes particular issue with the Classical Model and the Resource Mobilization Model.

The Classical Model is McAdam's name for several related theories of social movements that adhere to a pluralist ideology. According to McAdam: "The central tenet of the pluralist model is that, in America, political power is widely distributed between a host of competing groups rather than concentrated in the hands of any particular segment of society."¹⁴⁹ Under a democratic governing system, these parties have the ability to gather together and go through the proper channels of governance should they want to change something about the system. McAdam argues that under this theoretical framing, social movements are seen as psychological responses to "some underlying structural weakness in society" that leaves some members with feelings of "alienation and anxiety."¹⁵⁰ Therefore, any individual or group of people who have a problem with the system suffer from some

¹⁴⁹ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

kind of pathology. McAdam suggests that the Classical Model is untenable because it denigrates social movements as irrational gripes within a rational democratic system.

The Resource Mobilization Model is primarily concerned with the accumulation of power. Unlike the Classical Model, resource mobilization proposes that society is not democratic so much as it is oligarchical because it is ruled by an elite class of people who possess the majority of the resources: “There may exist a political arena in America but it is not the teeming convention hall depicted by the pluralists, but rather a restricted club reserved for the wealthy and powerful. Only those with sufficient political capital need apply.”¹⁵¹ In this model, the psychological state of people is of negligible consequence. The significant factor that leads to the success or failure of a social movement is access to resources: “Lacking such capital, most groups in American society have virtually no bargaining power with which to advance their collective interests.”¹⁵² McAdam argues that this model is far too limiting in its narrow scope. He contends that, although resources are important, they are hardly the only factors that lead to a successful revolution. An analysis of a social movement using only resource mobilization will likely miss numerous significant movement dynamics.

In response to these two models of social movement theory, McAdam offers his own, the Political Process model, to account for the aspects of a social movement theory that the others have missed. Rather than focusing primarily on the psychological make-up of its members or the resources available to them, McAdam’s theory encompasses three

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵² Ibid.

interrelated factors: “Expanding political opportunities; the mobilization of indigenous organizational resources; and the presence of certain shared cognitions within the minority community.”¹⁵³ The most prominent aspect of McAdam’s Political Process model is its emphasis on the notion of time. McAdam’s model does not just look for a few factors that contribute to a social movement. Instead, it takes a long view of history: “The political process model is based on the assumption that movements only emerge over a long period of time in response to broad social, economic, and political processes that afford insurgents a certain structural potential for collective action.”¹⁵⁴

McAdam relates this emphasis on time to the concept of political opportunity by proposing that other models do not take a long enough view to recognize how insurgencies only emerge after generations of gestation when their opposition has been weakened or its attention has been placed elsewhere. Moreover, the economic and institutional resources that are required for an effective insurgency need years to develop as well such that they can grow organically within the minority community itself. Last, and perhaps most important, the aggrieved party requires time to effectively mobilize their collective consciousness into a *cognitive liberation*: “One of the central problematics of insurgency, then, is whether favorable shifts in political opportunities will be defined as such by a large enough group of people to facilitate collective protest.”¹⁵⁵ In other words, key to the development of an

¹⁵³ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 48.

insurgency is whether participants “who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot.”¹⁵⁶

The Given World: Third Eye Model

Chela Sandoval’s concept of *oppositional consciousness* builds on McAdam’s notion of *cognitive liberation*. Sandoval states that *oppositional consciousness* “depends upon the ability to read the current situations of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations.”¹⁵⁷ Though McAdam correctly notes that no political insurgency can begin unless a critical mass of individuals experience a cognitive transformation that leads to an *oppositional consciousness*, he never adequately explains precisely how this transformation occurs. The contributing factors that must happen prior to *cognitive liberation* that McAdams articulates are largely material and situational. They do not account for the spark that must occur within people’s minds that inspires them to self-consciously try to change their reality as they know it.

Robin D. G. Kelley offers a point of entry into this conversation in his text, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Kelley urges the reader to think beyond the structure of black social movements and consider the black imagination as an undervalued area of study in interpreting the black struggle for equality within the United States. He states that black intellectuals associated with struggles for liberation “not only imagined a

¹⁵⁶ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 4, quoted in *ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Chela Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10 (spring 1991), 15 quoted in Kim Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

different future, but in many instances their emancipatory vision proved more radical and inclusive than what their compatriots proposed.”¹⁵⁸ Like McAdam, Kelley argues that it is not only wit and resources that hold an insurgency together, but rather a shared dream of a future far after the movement has ended. However, unlike McAdam’s emphasis on time and social movement structure, Kelley’s text focuses exclusively on better understanding the dreams that inspire these movements to begin with.

When introducing this notion of the black radical imagination, Kelley begins with a personal anecdote about how his mother encouraged her children to “live through [their] third eyes, to see life as a possibility.”¹⁵⁹ In this way, he contends that the black radical imagination is not necessarily based in logic. Kelley acknowledges in his introduction that the utopian dreams of black radical activists outlined in his chapters never actually came true, perhaps because they were never possible to begin with. Nevertheless, Kelley believes that logic is not a prerequisite on the path toward *cognitive liberation*. In contrast to McAdam, people do not have to see their resources accumulate or their political situations change in order to alter their outlook on life. Instead, to reach this state of consciousness, a person must enter a new space, a new world. For Kelley, the metaphor of the third eye represents “somewhere that exists only in our imaginations—that is, ‘nowhere.’”¹⁶⁰

For Kelley, the black surrealists of the early twentieth century offer the best example of the kind of *cognitive liberation* McAdam describes: “Surrealism, I contend, offers a vision

¹⁵⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 7.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of freedom far deeper and more expansive than of the movements discussed thus far.”¹⁶¹ In this way, Kelley opens the door to black artistic production as the potential location where the black radical imagination can flourish. Many scholars have identified the significance of the arts to the development of black insurgency. For example, in his book *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Richard Iton states: “For African Americans, partly because of their marginal status and often violent exclusion from the realms of formal politics, popular culture was an integral and important aspect of the making of politics.”¹⁶² Likewise, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal discusses how “Hip Hop’s appeal as an aurally constructed site for the invisible, though ever present, urban-determined youth that the genre has been so readily associated with has been invaluable to the development of these often symbolic, though still oppositional sensibilities.”¹⁶³

Perhaps more significant for this chapter, in his book *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, Adilifu Nama refers to Kelley’s “nowhere” by many names, including cosmic blackness, black space, and Afrofuturism. According to Nama, these mind-altering spaces find various outlets in popular culture: “Because filmmaking tends to be cost-prohibitive, art, independent black comic books, black music, and even hip-hop videos have

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 159.

¹⁶² Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

¹⁶³ Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 103.

functioned as alternative sites where futuristic fantasyscapes populated by black people can find expression.”¹⁶⁴

Kelley acknowledges that there are no achievable political objectives hidden within the freedom dreams produced in these spaces. Yet he argues that black social movements were informed by more than politically feasible goals. That is to say, McAdam’s *cognitive liberation* participates in a larger schematic than that represented in his theorization of the Political Process model. According to Kelley, the path to *cognitive liberation* and the eventual development of a black insurgency begins when a critical mass of individuals tune into their third eye and enter a *black space* where what is achievable is measured not by how many resources you possess or what the nation’s political climate is like. What can be achieved in *black space* depends only upon how far you are willing to dream.

In this chapter thus far, I have introduced two different theories of social insurgency offered by Doug McAdam and Robin D. G. Kelley. McAdam’s notion of *cognitive liberation* is primarily temporal. According to his Political Process Model, people do not just achieve an *oppositional consciousness* in a vacuum; it is part of a long process that unfolds over many years, if not decades as the case with the Civil Rights Movement. Kelley’s notion of the *black radical imagination*, on the other hand, is a primarily spatial concept. There is no political process that a person goes through to achieve a radical imagination according to what we might call Kelley’s Third Eye Model. Rather, it is imperative that you access a part of your mind that is only reachable through the use of your third eye. Once this third eye is open,

¹⁶⁴ Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 160.

you can return to that *black space* at any time irrespective of conditions in the Given World. It is important to recognize that *cognitive liberation* and the *black radical imagination* are not mutually exclusive concepts. On the contrary, I contend that they operate in tandem. However, because they operate on different planes, as theorized by McAdam and Kelley, the way they interact along the path towards effecting change in the real world requires a bit of speculation and an analysis of Samuel R. Delany's Modular Calculus.

Subject: The Modular Calculus

In *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & The Politics of the Paraliterary*, Samuel R. Delany describes the Modular Calculus as a set of equations that, through dense logical maneuvers, can take a partial description of something and extrapolate from that description an exact explanation of that thing. For example, someone who is versed in the Modular Calculus could take a sentence such as "I saw a plane fall out of the sky and burst into flames on the runway" and transform that sentence into "a full report of weather conditions, mechanical problems, and the pilot's responses that interacted to produce the particular and specific air crash."¹⁶⁵ Delany goes on to acknowledge that this kind of operation is complete fantasy. Nevertheless, his articulation of this imaginary concept raises important issues. Specifically, that in the Given World, while some descriptions may not be terribly explanatory, others are. Moreover, there are countless descriptions that *could* be explanatory through an adequate use of deductive reasoning. Thus, for Delany this situation begs the question: How do we determine whether a description is explanatory or not? This

¹⁶⁵ Samuel R. Delany, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & The Politics of the Paraliterary* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 343.

question could also be asked: How do we determine if a model accurately represents the modeled?

This question about modeling is especially significant as it relates to our discussion about McAdam's Political Process Model and Kelley's Third Eye Model. McAdam seeks to extrapolate from historical material and other social movement theories to account for how black people developed an insurgency in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. These historical accounts and theories might be considered *descriptions* or models of actual events that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. From these accounts, he attempts to develop an *explanation* or a clearer understanding of what actually happened. Particularly, in McAdam's case, he presents his model in direct opposition to previous theories because he contends that they are not sufficiently explanatory representations of these events. But these explanations take the form of yet another model because it is impossible for McAdam to fully represent the development of a black insurgency during the 1960s within the confines of his text since the experience itself is distinct from the model he offers.

Kelley, on the other hand, approaches the modeling of black insurgency differently. He is not concerned with providing an accurate account of historical events or material accumulation, but rather at representing the freedom dreams of black insurgents themselves. As described previously, there is a distinction between the dream that leads to liberation and the liberation movement itself. The movement that McAdam seeks to account for takes place in the Given World and is described in a linear and progressive fashion. In contrast, Kelley's representation of dreams are deeply personal and take place in our imaginations. These dreams of the future are represented spatially: "The idea that we

could possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imaginations—that is, ‘nowhere’—is the classic definition of *utopia*. Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother’s belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination.”¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Kelley’s Third Eye Model is still a representation a host of interrelated ideas that form a new world rather than an actual series of events. While it is fairly easy to understand how modeling events in the Given World may lead to misrepresentation, it is more difficult to recognize misrepresentations in the world of fiction. Just because Kelley’s freedom dreams take place in an imaginary space he deems utopian does not escape the potential for profound consequences for poor modeling techniques. Even in a place where logic is not adhered to with any particular vigor, according to Delany, utopian visioning is still a prime location to engage questions regarding whether or not a model accurately represents the modeled.

Delany approaches this issue by employing the Modular Calculus for the first time in his novel, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976). Delany’s diegetic prototype appears in the second title right after the table of contents: “Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus Part One.”¹⁶⁷ In this novel, Delany critiques a model of utopia as presented in Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974). In a manner similar to McAdam’s critique of alternative social movement models, Delany interrogates Le Guin’s text and presents his own as a way to form a dialogue about the capacity for SF to form an accurate model of a utopia.

¹⁶⁶ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976).

Le Guin takes on the challenge of modeling utopia by creating a story about a renowned physicist named Shevek from the authoritarian planet called Annares. Annares is marked by a harsh climate and scarcity of resources. Years ago, a society was started there by a group of religious followers seeking to build a world based on spiritual principles. During the story, Shevek travels from Annares to the capitalist planet, Urras, to work at a university where he can use their resources to develop his General Temporal Theory—a technology used for space travel that is very important to Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* novels in which *The Dispossessed* is included. The result of Shevek’s trip is a clash of utopian cultures, both of which believe in the righteousness of their societal model.¹⁶⁸

Though Delany greatly admires Le Guin’s novel, he argues that SF thinking is distinct from utopian thinking because utopian thinking requires too many constraints in order to remain utopic: “The fact is, I don’t think SF can be really utopian. I mean utopia presupposes a pretty static, unchanging, and rather tyrannical world.”¹⁶⁹ Delany argues that by “making her spiritual utopia a society based on scarcity and her decadent society one based on unequal distribution of riches in a very rich world, Le Guin swallows up several problems” that societies in the Given World face as a result of such theoretical models.¹⁷⁰

Delany’s critique suggests that Le Guin’s world-building techniques do not allow for an accurate representation of real-world human responses to such restrictive societies. For example, he argues that social ills like anarchy all but vanish under Le Guin’s depiction of Annares because “when the landscape is as harsh and ungiving as Annares’ and your laws

¹⁶⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

¹⁶⁹ Delany, *Shorter Views*, 323.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

are set up in ecological accord with it, you don't *have* to worry too much about individuals—or groups—deviating too far from these laws. Those who deviate, the landscape itself punishes—if not obliterates.”¹⁷¹ In other words, Delany argues, Le Guin creatively stacks the deck. Doing so is fine unless, as Delany argues, the objective is to render an actual theoretical model of utopia in a SF setting.

In contrast to Le Guin's meditation on utopian societies, Delany offers *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*. If not for the title and a rather lengthy essay titled “To Read the Dispossessed” included in Delany's collection of essays, *The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of SF*, the connection between the two novels would be difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, since Delany has addressed a perceived connection between the two texts several times, a dialogue emerges quite clearly. As stated earlier, Delany believes that SF and utopia are not compatible because SF is in dialogue with the Given World and the Given World is in constant flux. The very concept of a utopian society is impossible because society is always evolving, and a perfect society has no need to evolve as it is already a utopia. In other words, SF cannot provide an accurate model of utopia. Instead, Delany creates a society marked by the notion of heterotopia.

In *Shorter Views*, Delany speaks about why he uses the term heterotopia as opposed to utopia in his subtitle: “A major definition of ‘heterotopia’ is its medical meaning. It's the removal of one part or organ from the body and affixing it at another place in or on the body ... A skin graft is a heterotopia. But so is a sex change—one of the meanings of the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 323.

word.”¹⁷² This use of the term speaks specifically to the main character in *Triton*, Bron, who towards the end of the novel changes sex from man to woman. However, although Delany does not speak of Michel Foucault in this particular interview in *Shorter Views*, his novel illuminates connections between the two thinkers’ thoughts regarding the relationship between utopia and heterotopia.

In an essay published in 1967 called “Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia,” Foucault discusses the difference between a utopia and a heterotopia. He argues that a utopia does not exist in reality or the Given World. Instead, as imagined locations divorced from real places, “they present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down.”¹⁷³ In contrast, Foucault defines heterotopias as real places that act as conduits for other, often unreal, places simultaneously. He argues that every culture has real places like this that are formed and function “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹⁷⁴

To further illustrate the differences between utopia and heterotopia, Foucault raises the example of gazing into a mirror. He states that when a person looks into a mirror, they see themselves in a reflection that does not occupy space in the real world. Therefore, “the mirror is after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place ... I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface.”¹⁷⁵ Yet if we continue to look

¹⁷² Ibid., 342.

¹⁷³ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuite*, October 1984, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 4.

into the mirror we find ourselves acknowledging that the mirror exists in reality and that our reflections eventually lead us back to the recognition that we are standing in real space looking into virtual space. While in this virtual space, Foucault suggests that we begin to look back towards ourselves, and in the process, “I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.”¹⁷⁶ In this way, as we stand in front of the mirror, we occupy two spaces at once—the real and the unreal.

I argue that Delany’s use of heterotopia resonates with Foucault’s in the sense that Delany is interested in developing stories that function as heterotopic mirrors. He wants *Trouble on Triton* to function as a liminal space where the boundary between the Given World and the world of Triton comes down if only for a while. After all, like Foucault’s mirror, the book itself occupies real space and its narrative invites the reader on a journey to an utterly new planet. After engaging in the narrative, the reader will eventually turn their eyes back toward the Given World and reconstitute themselves. Here, SF acts like a mirror because, as referenced in chapter 1, Delany argues that fiction is but a critical distortion of the Given World. In this sense, his novel distorts reality the way a mirror distorts light. The reader can read *Triton* and acknowledge that it is both “absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”¹⁷⁷

A review of *Triton*’s narrative helps demonstrate precisely how this distortion works and illuminates its relationship to the Modular Calculus. The novel takes place on a planet

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

called Triton in a society where people live in group communes according to the kinds of interpersonal and sexual relationships in which they wish to participate. There are countless kinds of communes, referred to as co-ops within the novel, and there is also a section of the city called the “u-1,” or the unlicensed sector, where presumably anything outside of the law is permissible. The world Delany creates in *Triton* is quite different from contemporary American society. Today, the United States still adheres to models of socialization marked by patriarchal gender and sexual norms. On Triton, there are no sexual “norms” and there are numerous genders.

The differences between the Given World and Triton are quite obvious when the reader is introduced to the novel’s protagonist, Bron Helstrom, a former male prostitute from Mars and now professional practitioner of Metalogics. The central conflict in the novel for Bron is his inability to find comfort within the society of which he is a part. In “Nevèryon Deconstructed: Samuel R. Delany’s *Tales of Nevèryon* and the ‘Modular Calculus,’” Kathleen Spencer states: “Bron Helstrom, one of fiction’s sincerely unlikable protagonists, is a classic (though unconscious) male chauvinist inhabiting a society which is not only totally egalitarian but no longer restricts itself to only two sexes.”¹⁷⁸ In *Triton*, co-ops function as safe spaces where people are able to exercise their own sexual and social preferences freely according to what makes them feel the most comfortable. In addition, women are empowered to make the same choices as men as it relates to their sexual and interpersonal relations. The contrast between Bron’s discomfort and the plethora of options

¹⁷⁸ Kathleen L. Spencer, “Nevèryon Deconstructed: Samuel R. Delany’s *Tales of Nevèryon* and the ‘Modular Calculus,’” in *Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany*, ed. James Sallis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 133.

on Triton is a result of his own thinking, which is remarkably similar to stereotypical twentieth- and twenty-first-century norms.

As it relates to Delany's diegetic prototype, Spencer argues, "Bron's model, built on the hierarchical binary of male and female, cannot adequately map the world he lives in."¹⁷⁹ The novel includes this dynamic "to represent in narrative form the importance of an accurate model for effective or satisfactory social behavior."¹⁸⁰ In search of the perfect model, Bron perhaps commits the most twisted chauvinistic act ever after being dumped by his love interest in the story, The Spike. In a scathing letter, The Spike parts ways with Bron citing his difficult personality. In response, Bron decides that the world as he knows it is no longer inhabited by women who appreciate men. Seeking to tip the balance, Bron gets a sex change and becomes a woman so that he can save the human race from extinction: "Humanity. They used to call it 'mankind.' And I remember reading once that some women objected to that as too exclusive. Basically, though, it wasn't exclusive enough! ... What gives the species the only value it has are men."¹⁸¹ Bron becomes a woman so that he can love men like himself in a manner he finds that women are unable or unwilling to do.

Through including this narrative in *Triton*, Delany speaks to the nature of social models and the challenges individuals face when they attempt to participate in them by inviting the reader to enter an imaginary space similar to Kelley's nowhere. Here, the reader is given a glimpse at a new world where innovative and presumably more sexually liberating social models are presented in stark contrast to the restrictive models that are in place today.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Delany, *Trouble on Triton*, 231.

This world is marked by a fluidity that is represented by each character's ability to express sexual desire, self-image, and gender outside of twentieth-century social norms. Unlike the representation of utopia he critiques, Delany's creation ensures through his narrative technique that his model is in direct conversation with the Given World. This is accomplished primarily through the development of Bron's character as the protagonist. Although Bron is unlikable, he is framed as a critical distortion of twentieth-century sexual and gender norms. As such, the reader's Given World is reflected to them as they read into the narrative.

In addition to critiquing models of utopia, Part One of Delany's "Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus" also hints at another level of interest as it relates to models. Namely, Delany questions the distinction between the binaries of the model and the modeled, the signifier and the signified, the surreal and the real. In *Triton*, periodic scenes throughout the text in which Bron plays a board game called Vlet with a member of his co-op named Lawrence serve as oft-overlooked engagements with this grand inquiry.

Locating Samuel R. Delany's Nowhere

In *Triton*, Vlet is a 3D Sword and Sorcery board game that the men in Bron's co-op play for fun. As described in the book, it is a fairly complicated game where one or more players, each in charge of legions of people, battle each other. To what end exactly is unclear. In the text the rules of the game are never fully explained. Nor do the players, usually Bron and Lawrence, ever finish the game. Perhaps the most fruitful piece of information about Vlet that a reader can grasp is an image of a ridiculously long equation used to score the game—a scoring system that even the players, such as Bron, never really understand

throughout the novel. Delany says of the fictional scoring system: “Now if the reader happens to be mathematically literate enough to realize, after trying to untangle it (for someone familiar with advanced calculus, it takes about ten seconds), that not only is it daunting, it’s also meaningless.”¹⁸² The most significant clue to the game’s meaning has little to do with the rules and more to do with its name. Delany did not invent the game for the purposes of his story; instead, he borrowed it from a short story called “A Game of Vlet” by the acclaimed SF writer, Joanna Russ.

In this short story, a governor’s wife, referred to as Lady, plays a board game with one of her subjects named Rav. As they play the game however, it becomes clear that the world of the story is affected by the moves the players make. If troops move on the board, they do so on the outside of the castle as well. Delany is intrigued by this because as you read the story, “you can’t really tell where the game ends and the world takes up.”¹⁸³ In effect, it is hard to tell which is real within the story, the model or the modeled. With this in mind, in an interview with *Science Fiction Studies*, Delany reveals that his *Nevèryon* series is essentially the game of Vlet made into a larger universe of interconnected stories. He describes Vlet as a Sword and Sorcery game and states: “In some ideal future world, with ideal readers, the books might all be considered part of a larger amorphous work, ‘Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus,’ to which *Triton* is the SF Prologue.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Delany, *Shorter Views*, 332.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

The Object: Tales of Nevèrjón

The first of these Nevèrjón collections, *Tales of Nevèrjón* (1979), tells the story of a man name Gorgik and his rise from enslavement in the mines to leading a sizable slave revolt in a port town of Neveryóna named Kolhari. In this Sword and Sorcery tale there are no spaceships, aliens, or cyborgs. According to Kathleen Spencer, Sword and Sorcery is “the most formulaic of SF’s many paraliterary cousins and offspring” and because of this, the genre comes with several reader expectations.¹⁸⁵ Sword and Sorcery gained great popularity with the publishing of Robert E. Howard’s Conan stories in the 1930s. Several films have since been made about Howard’s character including two 1980s blockbusters starring Arnold Schwarzenegger: *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Conan the Destroyer* (1984).

Spencer explains that the genre consists of several key elements. First, most Sword and Sorcery tales are set in a civilization that is unstable: “One key element in this instability is that the society is in transition from a barter to a money economy.”¹⁸⁶ Next, these societies are also in “transition from rural and feudal to the urban and more democratic.”¹⁸⁷ Anchoring these transitions, Spencer points out that the social dynamics of these worlds are defined by two main arenas, the feudal estate which is weakening and the city which is becoming increasingly more significant. Thus, the city becomes “the center of the cultural flux, where all nations, races, and social classes may meet and mingle, where anything is possible.”¹⁸⁸ In contrast, the feudal state is associated with “the wilderness, the borderlands

¹⁸⁵ Spencer, “Nevèrjón Deconstructed,” 134.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

roamed by wild animals and wilder men, where the only law is what one can make for oneself with a good right arm.”¹⁸⁹

Spencer articulates an additional trope that within this world emerges a hero who is loosely based on the Viking stereotype but with no actual identifiable real historical references. This hero “is not civilized: he is physically strong, skilled with weapons, dangerous, violent, but above all he is independent, a loner (or he may travel with a single trusted companion).”¹⁹⁰ Within this world of transition, the lone barbarian is the hero because he flourishes in a setting where the rules of civilized society are not yet fully formed and the strongest man, with enough wit and knowhow, can still roam free by setting his own agenda. As Spencer suggests, this protagonist is a teenage boy’s fantasy: “lots of adventure, excitement, sex whenever you want, but no awkward demands afterward, no responsibilities, no commitments; no worries about money, no wife or children or boring daily job.”¹⁹¹

At first glance Delany’s text fits very neatly into this description. The main character of the *Neverjon* series is an ex-slave named Gorgik who is released from slavery, trained in the royal court, and eventually discharged into the world with a set of physical and mental skills that allow him to be a leader in an environment on the brink of civilization. However, despite Gorgik’s bulging muscles, cleverness, and infectious personality, as the reader continues through the text, it becomes clear that Delany’s objective is not to adhere to the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 135.

norms and conventions of your favorite Sword and Sorcery story, but to upset the model utterly.

As Spencer points out, Gorgik, though undeniably the protagonist of the Nevèrjyon stories, is too old at thirty-six to fit genre expectations. Moreover, Delany emphasizes that “his hair is rough and thinning and dusty, while his face adds a full six years to his age” making him middle-aged.¹⁹² Additionally, Gorgik was trained in the ways of high society while he was a servant in the high court. His status as a civilized hero is essentially oxymoronic in this genre. In addition, Gorgik only sleeps with one woman the entire series—the woman who freed him from slavery—and “when Gorgik has his free choice of sexual partners, he chooses not a woman but a barbarian boy, Small Sarg, who he in turn rescued from slavery.”¹⁹³

It is also notable that this hero is black. Traditionally, nearly all characters, let alone heroes, in Sword and Sorcery stories are white. Nevertheless, in this narrative the very term barbarian refers to members of “the blond, grey-eyed uncivilized people of the south.”¹⁹⁴ Slyly, using a genre traditionally reserved for depictions of white heroes expressing their freedom through violence and rogue individuality, Delany tells the story of a slave revolt led by a black man. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Gorgik never actually has an epic adventure. In *Tales of Nevèrjyon*, events just happen over time without intense fighting or grand feats of victory. Spencer describes the first short story in the series, “A Tale of

¹⁹² Ibid., 136.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 136.

Gorgik,” as “a kind of peculiar bildungsroman, the story of Gorgik’s education from youth to maturity, told in the least dramatic way possible.”¹⁹⁵

Spencer takes Delany’s *Sword and Sorcery* tale and extrapolates that he is experimenting with the genre to demonstrate a larger inquiry about the nature of modeling real life situations. In at least two significant ways, Delany refuses to adhere to form throughout the *Neverÿon* series in order to question the reader’s perception of fiction and reality. First, when the reader begins the text, knowing it is a *Sword and Sorcery* tale, they are inclined to view the events that transpire and the characters they are introduced to through a certain lens of expectations. Also, as it relates to dramatic fiction writ large, readers engage a text expecting to see some form of story arc that includes climactic action. In both instances, Delany refuses to satisfy these socialized desires. Spencer argues that Delany denies the reader the satisfaction of these expectations because “it is part of the formula, the way we expect things to happen in fiction rather than an accurate model of real life.”¹⁹⁶ By writing against the formula Delany creates a fiction that “forces us to notice simultaneously both the model’s existence and its conventionality, its inadequacy as a map of life.”¹⁹⁷

The dissatisfaction that a reader feels because of unrealized expectations raises larger questions as it pertains to the relationship between fiction and reality. As a reader, I have never participated in a slave revolt or an insurgency. But I have read about such happenings in history books and watched acclaimed documentaries about them. Likewise,

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

when I watch *The Matrix* or read *Tales of Nevèrjón*, I recognize the drama represented in these fictions as slave revolts because they are fictional representations of the events depicted in the scholarly books and films I have previously encountered. And yet, like fiction, a historical text or a documentary depicting an event is not the event itself, but rather a representation of that event. Scholarly representations, much like literary genres such as *Sword and Sorcery*, adhere to certain conventions. Likewise, as a scholar, I read academic texts with a set of expectations from which I judge a text's merit. With this in mind, whether it concerns scholarly or literary texts, how might we distinguish between the model and the thing(s) it represents?

Delany approaches this problem brilliantly by experimenting with authorship in *Tales of Nevèrjón* (1979). This collection consists of both a Preface and an Appendix. While Delany is the author of stories within the body of the book, which are collectively subtitled "Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus Part Two," the Preface is written by a woman named K. Leslie Steiner and the Appendix, subtitled "The Modular Calculus Part Three," is penned by S. L. Kermit. In the preface, Steiner describes herself as "your average black American female academic, working in the largely white preserves of a sprawling Midwestern university."¹⁹⁸ Steiner claims responsibility for the translation of an ancient text called the Culhar' fragment.¹⁹⁹ She then informs the reader that this text is considered the very earliest form of human writing known to date. In addition, the text attempts to relay a story:

¹⁹⁸ Delany, *Tales of Nevèrjón*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

I have worked with that ancient, fragmented, and incomplete narrative, with its barbarians, dragons, sunken cities, reeds and memory marks, twin-bladed warrior women, child ruler, one-eyed dreamer and mysterious rubber balls, for many many months, spread out over what has become many years.²⁰⁰

Unfortunately, understanding what these fragmented elements mean has been very difficult for Steiner to grasp. Luckily, Steiner writes, her friend Samuel R. Delany, inspired by the translated Culhar' fragment, wrote the Nevèryon stories, in consultation with her expert commentary, to transform these glimpses of humanity's first society into a cohesive narrative. Thus, *Tales of Nevèryon* functions as a fictional representation of what modern humanity's origins might have been like.

In the Appendix, a colleague of Steiner's, S. L. Kermit, provides a more in-depth analysis of the Culhar' fragment's discovery, Steiner's approach to cryptography, and the text's relative significance to history. His short essay at the end of *Tales of Nevèryon* informs the reader that despite Steiner's laudable efforts to translate the document, it is still impossible to determine the original language in which the fragment was written, where it originated from, or the sex of the narrator. Moreover, Kermit quotes Steiner who concedes: "The highest probability my equations yield for my suggested translations is fifty percent."²⁰¹ Therefore, very little can be said with certainty for exactly what has been discovered by Steiner except that "the Culhar' Text itself seems to play through the spectrum of Eastern and Western languages as translations of translations, some older, some newer, but finally with no locable origin."²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 13.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 258.

²⁰² Ibid., 260.

The fact that the fragment has no locable origin is apropos considering the imaginary land Delany creates to represent the fragment's origin is called Neveryóna. Etymologically, the name can be split into three distinct words: *Ne*, *ver*, and *yona*. In the English language, Delany's imaginary kingdom is translated as *not-ever-there*, or more simply, *nowhere*. Delany's collection of short stories is derived from fragments with no home base and all of the events in the stories that he creates take place in a location that is literally nowhere. These facts become even more salient when the reader discovers that the scholarly discussions that form bookends for *Tales of Nevèrjón* are fictions in and of themselves. K. Leslie Steiner is not a scholar; she is actually a pen name that Samuel R. Delany uses occasionally in several other texts. Likewise, her colleague, S. L. Kermit, is also a fictional character that Delany uses to write critically about the stories the reader has just enjoyed.

Entering Samuel R. Delany's Nowhere

Delany's experimentation with models suggests that the distinction between a model and the thing(s) it models is blurry. Yet his Nevèrjón series does not go so far as to argue that there is *no* distinction. In fact, Delany ensures that his scholarly essays which are attributed to fictional authors are decipherable as fiction, presumably so that reader is informed of his own control over the experiment he weaves.²⁰³ Nevertheless, by drawing attention to this blurry line between the model and its subject, he also suggests that this

²⁰³ Writing specifically about Delany's *Trouble on Triton*, Spencer argues that Delany's use of these appendices allows him to maintain a fictional stance and "still discuss directly (non-representationally) the philosophical problems whose relevance the novel has just demonstrated." Spencer, "Nevèrjón Deconstructed," 133.

nebulous quality is attributable to the relationship between fiction and reality. Implementing Delany's treatment of the Modular Calculus allows us to return to McAdam's Political Process Model and recognize that his work, though scholarly, is but a representation of an actual insurgency. His deliberations about black insurgency, however accurate, can never fully account for what actually happens when people decide to revolt.

Spencer comments on this dynamic by referencing Jacques Derrida's notion of the *trace*. Spencer reviews Derrida's argument in *Of Grammatology* regarding how, since the time of Plato, speech has been privileged over writing. She describes how speech is considered to be the medium that captures the immediate thoughts of the speaker: "Speech in this view is immediate, primal, spontaneous, a mark of presence, a guide to the nature of the speaker."²⁰⁴ On the other hand, writing is considered one level removed from speech—a calculated organization of one's thoughts. Spencer states that writing is "a model, an imitation of speech, distanced from the presence, and therefore a mark of the absence of presence."²⁰⁵ Spencer argues that speech is nothing more than a phonic sign, not the thing itself. Therefore, it should not be privileged over writing because the spoken word is yet another model. In making this claim, Spencer draws on Derrida's argument that there is always something before the sign—the model only captures a *trace* of what it attempts to represent. Paraphrasing Derrida, Spencer states: "The trace is not the origin, and hence has no weight of authority which philosophers attach to the origin, but it is as close to the origin that we can get."²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 152.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Although Kelley's Third Eye Model is primarily concerned with an imagined "nowhere," these imagined locations are valuable because they provide opportunities for people to develop new models that are seemingly impossible. Yet, as Delany demonstrates, scholarship—widely accepted as a genre focused on depicting reality—should not, *de facto*, be considered more valuable than fiction when it comes to modeling. Neither scholarship nor fiction is able to model something exactly. However, as Kelley makes apparent in his text, when it comes to envisioning "nowhere," there is far more possibility in fiction than is available in the Given World. And for this reason, entering "nowhere" becomes particularly important for groups of individuals who are oppressed in the Given World.

The primary message to take from Delany's *Neveryon* series is that when considering models for social change the imaginary world of SF is far more valuable than we tend to acknowledge. When we privilege scholarly models over fictional models, we lose sight of a bidirectional relationship that is essential to social change. As it pertains specifically to the development of a black insurgency, the Modular Calculus demonstrates that *the black radical imagination* is necessary to conjure an *oppositional consciousness*. In the next chapter on Octavia Butler's diegetic prototype, Earthseed, we engage a vision of what such an *oppositional consciousness* looks like from a Black Feminist perspective.

Planting Earthseed:

Octavia Butler, *The Apocalypse*, and Theorizing Black Feminist Epistemology

It's after the end of the world! Don't you know that yet?

—June Tyson, *Space is the Place* (1974).

As documented time and time again by scholars such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Paula Giddings, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, and Patricia Hill Collins, black women have achieved incredible feats against seemingly insurmountable odds across US history.²⁰⁷ Despite intersecting discrimination including racism and sexism, black women have always found ways to move beyond the obstacles that have been set in their path. After generations of struggle, black women can be found in nearly every role imaginable in politics, industry, the arts, and education. The contributions of black women to these arenas are endless, and yet, if we engage the work of Wahneema Lubiano, Kimberly Springer, and Alexander G. Weheliye it becomes clear that these triumphs often transpire unnoticed.

I seek to examine these different arguments and in the process, establish how black feminist thought resonates on a foundational level with Octavia Butler's *Parable* series. In this series of novels, Butler employs a diegetic prototype called Earthseed that moves beyond the theoretical framing offered by Lubiano, Springer, and Weheliye by attempting to create an alternate reality where black women circumvent existing knowledge structures

²⁰⁷ These authors all come from different disciplines, but their scholarship shares similar themes—namely, the critique of socio-political norms that stem from white patriarchal systems of power.

altogether. As a technology, Earthseed functions as a catalyst for social and biological evolution. An interrogation of Earthseed's proposed evolution reveals how Butler's diegetic prototype embodies what Patricia Hill Collins theorizes as a black feminist epistemology. Implementing such an epistemology in the Given World, as in Butler's text, might significantly address society's contemporary struggles regarding equity in relation to gender, race, and sexuality.

The Given World: Lubiano, Springer, and Weheliye

In "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," Wahneema Lubiano argues that black nationalism, though accepted within black communities as a positive strategy against oppression, is in fact destructive to black people as a whole and black women in particular. Her argument proposes that black nationalism is problematic for myriad reasons, but there are two in particular that stand out for the purposes of this chapter: 1) It is practiced as common sense ideology; and 2) It perpetuates a hierarchical order within the black community that is both patriarchal and homophobic.

As a common sense ideology, Lubiano argues that black nationalism is so pervasive that black people do not even realize when they participate in it. It operates in such a way that it seems as if it is the natural order of things: "When I say 'common sense,' then, I refer to ideology lived and articulated in everyday understandings of the world and one's place in it."²⁰⁸ This ability to float around within the community unnoticed is precisely why it is

²⁰⁸ Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," in *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 232.

so dangerous. Lubiano's framing of this concept is reminiscent of how Toni Morrison describes racist ideology that pervades American literature in her text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*: "Suddenly I saw the [fish] bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world."²⁰⁹ More importantly for this essay, common sense functions as a system of knowledge. Quoting the cultural theorist James Kavanagh, Lubiano writes that ideology is "a fundamental framework of assumptions that defines the parameters of the real and the self."²¹⁰ As such, common sense ideology aids the individual in constructing and understanding the world around them.

Lubiano contends that, as an everyday ideology, black nationalism organizes black people into reactionary categories that emphasize the value of racial identity over the multitude of identities found within the black community. In this way, questions of equality related to sexuality and gender are rendered secondary to the overarching goals of "racial solidarity, cultural specificity, religious, economic and political separatism."²¹¹ This kind of ideological framework elevates black heterosexual males as "the foundation of 'black people' via the establishment of strong black families with strong black Patriarchs."²¹² Lubiano acknowledges that black nationalism can be effective at fighting against racial oppression because it can bring a diverse group of black people together under a single banner. However, if left unchecked, it can have negative consequences within the group

²⁰⁹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 17.

²¹⁰ Lubiano, "Black Nationalism," 232.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 245.

structure. In *Black Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley writes specifically about how the preeminence of racial solidarity promotes an “ostensibly gender-neutral conception of the black community” and in the process, silences the needs of black women.²¹³

Lubiano provides an example of how a common sense black nationalism effectively silences black women in popular culture. Using Tupac Shakur’s song, “Keep Ya Head Up,” she argues that a song meant to celebrate black women actually ends up suppressing their potentiality. “Keep Ya Head Up” is regarded by critics as perhaps one of Tupac’s greatest hits. And this is Lubiano’s major point: “It is more disturbing precisely because it is so easily accommodated, so easily routinized in ways that reproduce the problematic of the status quo.”²¹⁴ She goes on to state that because the song is so beautiful, the listener is distracted from hearing its ideological content. A close reading of the lyrics reveals that Tupac’s song, coming out of the tradition of gangsta rap, celebrates the black woman as a mother figure above all else. Lubiano argues that these lyrics restrict black women from possessing identities outside of motherhood by reinscribing the family values at the heart of common sense black nationalism where the head of the household is a heterosexual black male.

Lubiano draws on examples such as “Keep Ya Head Up” to provide a robust critique of black nationalism as a useful common sense ideology and system of knowledge for black people. Lubiano’s essay does a great job of discussing how black nationalism permeates the black community and restricts black women’s potentiality, but it does not offer an

²¹³ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 137.

²¹⁴ Lubiano, “Black Nationalism,” 247.

alternative. Perhaps developing a new ideology is simply beyond the scope of her essay. In addition, her critique is focused primarily on a knowledge structure created within the black community. In the next section, I examine Kimberly Springer's critique, which branches outward to Eurocentric knowledge systems.

Black Women Did More Than We Know

Kimberly Springer's text, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980*, takes on the academy's approach toward documenting social movements. According to Springer, past and contemporary models of social movement theory, particularly Resource Mobilization and theories of Collective Identity, do not account for the form of social resistance executed by black women during the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, when the history of social movements in America is taught around the globe, the contributions of black women are largely left out except in the context of movements such as the Civil Rights Movement or Second Wave Feminism. Springer offers a new model of social movement theory informed by the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Belinda Robnett that recognizes the interstitial nature of black women's organizations.

According to Springer, traditional social movement theories such as Resource Mobilization and Collective Identity theories are not adequate tools for identifying and understanding black feminist organizations because they are too one-dimensional. Springer states "resource mobilization theory helps illuminate the organizational aspects and the environments from which black feminist organizations emerged." She continues "Collective identity perspectives bring social psychology back into the literature by

including identity-based movements as legitimate forms of social protest.”²¹⁵ Though these models are excellent at identifying singular aspects of a movement, the work of black women like Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective²¹⁶ slips through the cracks because her organization utilized a nontraditional administrative structure to address issues of race, sexuality, gender, and class all at once.

The problematic faced by Springer resembles the issues addressed by educators such as Kimberly Wallace-Sanders and Valerie Smith. In *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*, Smith stresses the importance of intersectionality²¹⁷ in the classroom setting because “the ostensible dominance of one category masks both the operation of the others and the interconnectedness among them” and therefore provides an inaccurate reading of a text or situation.²¹⁸ Echoing a similar concern in *Skin Deep Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, Wallace-Sanders recalls trying to teach a graduate school course on the black female body: “It was nearly impossible to teach these courses using theoretical texts that ignored the intersections of both race and gender. In discourse that linked the body to larger systems of knowledge, it seemed all of the female bodies were white, all of the black bodies, male.”²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Kim Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

²¹⁶ The Combahee River Collective was a group of black feminists who started meeting in 1974. Critical of white feminists, who they felt often neglected the concerns of black women, members of the Combahee River Collective drafted a document, The Combahee River Collective Statement. In this document, they propose a history of black feminist thought, explain their origins as a collective, and discuss organizing strategy.

²¹⁷ Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw that accounts for the interplay among the different systems of oppression pertaining to race, gender, class, and sexuality.

²¹⁸ Valerie Smith, *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), xv.

²¹⁹ Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Skin Deep Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2.

To surmount such issues and more accurately account for the contributions of black women, Springer develops a new social movement theory she calls Interstitial Politics. For Springer, the notion of an Interstitial Politics bridges the gap between Resource Mobilization theory and theories of Collective Identity. For instance, her theory acknowledges that many black feminists were not paid employees of an organization, but instead, “fit their activism into their daily life schedules whenever possible, serving as full-time, unpaid staff.”²²⁰ Moreover, unlike other popular social justice movements, black feminist organizations focused on several issues simultaneously: “Black feminists developed a collective identity and basis for organizing that reflected the intersecting nature of black womanhood.”²²¹ In this way, Springer maintains that black women were the first activists in the United States to “theorize and act upon the intersections of race, class, and gender.”²²²

In addition to developing a new theory of how to identify the contributions of black women to social justice movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Springer uses methodologies designed by Patricia Hill Collins and Belinda Robnett to aid in the research of these organizations. Using a similar research methodology as Collins in her text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Springer prioritizes oral histories and archival documents rather than secondary material found in history books. The decision to use these materials adheres to Collins’s concept of standpoint theory: “A subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a

²²⁰ Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 2.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than the dominant group.”²²³ With this in mind, it is imperative to use material that most accurately accounts for the unique perspective of black women.

Finally, Springer also uses Belinda Robnett’s concept of *bridge leadership*²²⁴ to help identify some of the most significant contributors to black feminist organizations. Springer states: “Bridge leaders connect the will of the people to traditional leaders of the movement through their grassroots organizing skills that include relating to people based on commonalities.”²²⁵ This is a significant concept because it proposes that black feminist leaders often occupied an interstitial space between the role of leader and follower. This would contend that black feminist organizations practiced nontraditional forms of leadership. Springer’s analysis reinforces that just because someone’s name is listed on a document doesn’t necessarily mean they are in charge.

The most significant aspect of Springer’s text is her recognition of holes in contemporary Western knowledge systems and her development of a research methodology and theoretical framework for how to address the problem. This differs significantly from Lubiano’s text that seeks to illuminate a problematic within a knowledge system practiced among the black community that is so subtle, it often goes unnoticed. In the next section, I analyze how Andrew Weheliye widens the scope of our inquiry by

²²³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2000), 339.

²²⁴ Springer references Robnett’s explanation of this theory in her book, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

²²⁵ Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 13.

investigating how the field of Biopolitics is structured in such a way that it is incapable of recognizing the contributions of black women scholars.

Knowledge that Changes the World

In his text, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Feminist Theories of the Human*, Alexander Weheliye takes an even broader approach than Springer by articulating a critique of Western epistemology. He argues, like Springer, that black women are left out of the conversation in the academy far too often. He contends that because knowledge in the academy is based on a Eurocentric model, nearly any qualitative scholarship produced by black women is often considered unrelatable whereas work by white men is universal. Weheliye elaborates on a tendency within the academy “in which theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted a conceptual *carte blanche*, while those uttered from the purview of minority discourse that speak to the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality.”²²⁶

To more thoroughly articulate this argument, Weheliye suggests that the work of Michel Foucault frames the notion of Biopower through a Eurocentric lens and describes how Foucault’s concept is seen and used throughout the world as a commentary applicable to all human beings. In contrast, the work of a black woman such as Hortense Spillers or Sylvia Wynter is usually seen as only relevant to the lives of black women, contained in the field of black feminism even though they may be speaking to a similar issue as Foucault. Weheliye concludes that black women are routinely left out of philosophical concerns such

²²⁶ Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.

as epistemology and ontology altogether even when represented within the academy as respected presidents, deans, and professors.

In an effort to demonstrate the breadth of this injustice, Weheliye reexamines the field of Biopolitics by critiquing Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, a foundational text in the field. In the process, Weheliye demonstrates that the supposedly universal nature of his argument instead favors a reading informed by white male perspectives. In addition, because it is framed as a universal theory, it actually perpetuates inequality and sets the stage for Weheliye's main thesis which purports that Eurocentric knowledge systems organize people into unequal categories of human. Ironically, this argument can be teased out most effectively by exchanging Agamben's theory of *bare life* with Hortense Spillers's notion of the Flesh as the foundation of contemporary debates in Biopolitics.

Reaching back into ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, Agamben's concept of *bare life* refers to life within a sovereign system that no longer has political rights as protected by the State. Weheliye describes *bare life* as "[b]eing both literally and symbolically stripped of all accoutrements associated with the liberalist subject."²²⁷ Thus, *bare life* has no value; it is acknowledged by the political system but only to differentiate it from people who are protected by the rights granted through sovereignty. Moreover, as described by Weheliye, because it has no value, Agamben "imagines the field of bare life as

²²⁷ Ibid., 33.

eradicating divisions among humans along the lines of race, religion, nationality, or gender” because as the lowest form of humanity, it “transcends social and political markers.”²²⁸

To concretize this notion in reality, Agamben uses the Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust to describe a time in the twentieth century when Jewish citizens in Europe were relegated to the state of *bare life*. Agamben argues that the concentration camp represents the harshest version of *bare life* in recent history and as such, he “seeks to disentangle the Holocaust from its status as an ultimate yet historically discrete aberration of modernity.”²²⁹ Agamben’s contention is that the state of *bare life* is a recurring, though not necessarily essential, aspect of Western sovereignty that potentially represents an arena where differences among *all* individuals no longer matter.

Spillers’s notion of the Flesh refers to a similar division between life that has political value and life that does not. However, the Flesh highlights “the embodiment of those banished to the zone of indistinction and by showing how bare life is transmitted historically so as to become affixed to certain bodies.”²³⁰ Using the institution of slavery instead of the concentration camp, the Flesh is distinguished from the politicized body after the instruments of slavery have been employed. After the body has become Flesh, or life without political value, this distinction never leaves the body completely. Rather, it is passed on from generation to generation through markings on the skin, or more broadly, the color of the skin: “What Spillers refers to as the Hieroglyphics of the Flesh created by these

²²⁸ Ibid., 34.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid., 38.

instruments [of slavery] is transmitted to the succeeding generations of black subjects who have been 'liberated' and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement."²³¹

According to Weheliye's interpretation of Spillers the end of slavery does not restore full humanity to people who have been relegated to the status of Flesh. Despite the political recognition of black people as citizens after the fact, Weheliye argues they will never be fully human and their ancestors will not either because their skin still carries the mark of the Flesh. As a result, people who possess Hieroglyphics of the Flesh are more likely to be treated unequally in society as time goes on. Spillers's notion of the Flesh takes Agamben's concept of *bare life* and strips it of its white male universality. As Flesh, we see how *bare life* is never void of issues of race. In addition, as Weheliye argues further in the text, it does not escape issues of gender, sexuality, or class either.

While Spillers's work is now widely cited, her concept of the Flesh was not discussed in the field of Biopolitics until Weheliye's book. In contrast, Agamben's theorization of *bare life* helped develop an entire field of study that makes universal claims about humanity despite positing an argument that is logically unsound from any standpoint other than white male perspectives. What makes Weheliye's work special is that he demonstrates how traditionally black feminist thinkers are undervalued in European knowledge systems. Not only does Spillers's concept of the Flesh offer an alternative to Agamben's *bare life*, it challenges the utility of the field altogether. Nevertheless, rather than being lauded as a critical contribution to the field, her theory of the Flesh is relegated to the margins.

²³¹ Ibid., 39.

New Epistemologies

Lubiano, Springer, and Weheliye all advocate for black women's voices to be heard within Eurocentric and patriarchal systems of knowledge. They also all go about this battle in different ways. Lubiano critiques the black community itself, suggesting that it needs to be more inclusive. Springer critiques the academy for overlooking black women's contributions throughout the history of social movements. Weheliye interrogates the way knowledge is constructed, contending that black female scholars may have solutions to help us better understand an unjust system. Nevertheless, none of these authors propose an entirely new knowledge system that places black women at the foundation.

Weheliye's text dances around this notion. While he doesn't forge a new system of epistemology himself, his text is in conversation with Patricia Hill Collins's proposal of a new epistemology in her text, *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins argues for a new theory of the intellectual that includes black women thinkers who might not be considered scholars under the current system. She argues, "White men control western structures of knowledge validation, [and] their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship."²³² Thus, the knowledge claims produced by black women are routinely ignored as if they don't exist. In response, Collins outlines a black feminist epistemology that accounts for the knowledge claims of black women.

As it relates to AF, Collins's standpoint theory is among her most salient points. As quoted earlier in this essay, Collins states: "A subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality

²³² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 267.

differently than the dominant group”²³³ Consequently, for the knowledge claims of black women to be heard, adjusting the existing Eurocentric knowledge system is not enough because, at the core, it prioritizes white male perspectives. Instead, as Weheliye implies through the use of Spillers’s work, the very foundation of the knowledge system must be replaced altogether, bringing the potential for the emergence of a new reality.

Object: Perils of the Pox

I argue that the new reality Collins imagines and Weheliye attempts to find is already being created in the contemporary discourse of AF. AF is a window into a world where the most marginalized are not just present, but run the show. The narratives produced by authors such as Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nalo Hopkinson star black women who represent the full human spectrum of emotion and capability. Moreover, it is within narratives such as these where participants in an unfair system have the opportunity to create visions of a new reality after this world, to which we so dearly cling for fear of the possibilities that lie in Spillers’s ether of the Flesh, comes to an end.

Octavia Butler’s most popular work includes the *Patternmaster* series, the *Xenogenesis* series, and the *Parable* series. These narratives focus on alternative visions of Earth that have been ravaged by some unforeseen event. During these scenarios, human beings, aliens, and other odd creatures often work toward creating a better society from what has been left in the wake of destruction. Despite this tendency, Butler’s novels do not

²³³ Ibid., 339.

model utopias. Conversely, Butler is adamant that utopia is not something she is interested in writing about:

Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would probably be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system.²³⁴

Thus, the main concern regarding utopia is its fixed nature. It does not allow for change to transpire in the fashion that it does in the Given World.

In Butler's unfinished *Parable* series—which includes *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*—change is the operative theme throughout, represented through the invention of a diegetic prototype called Earthseed. In this section, I examine how Butler's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, the main character in the *Parable* series, embraces change to facilitate a new future for her community in an apocalyptic setting. This engagement demonstrates how Butler's story provides an environment where alternative knowledge structures are allowed to flourish as white patriarchal systems of power are forced to cede control. To fully understand how Earthseed functions, it is useful to review Olamina's narrative arc, examine how contemporary issues of racism and sexism from the Given World are projected into the series' future setting, and analyze how the story addresses the concerns outlined by Lubiano, Springer, and Weheliye respectively.

The first book in Butler's *Parable* series, *Parable of the Sower*, begins in the near future of 2024 as the United States suffers through the aftermath of the Pox—a grand series

²³⁴ Octavia Butler, quoted in Sarah Outterson, "Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy" *Utopian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2008): 453.

of events including climate change, economic disaster, and the growing distrust of the governing body that leads to the collapse of the United States as a global superpower. It is not an apocalypse in the sense that the world has come to an end. Rather, the systems in place that support peaceful society have been torn down. In fashioning this future, Butler makes a commentary on the notion of apocalypse in America. Rather than the actual world coming to an end, Butler envisions a world power transitioning from a fragile social order to perceived chaos.

In truth, Earth is not under threat at all. Instead, America's standing as a geopolitical power has simply diminished from its late twentieth-century zenith. What is left in the aftermath is a broken state where rich people become even more powerful while the middle class, poor, and ethnic minorities are left fending for their lives, a state of affairs that recalls the contemporary circumstances facing people in many places around the globe presently including the United States. The *Parable* series begins in a dilapidated future version of Los Angeles and is structured as a series of journal entries authored by the main character, Lauren Olamina. The reader witnesses the harsh environment that the Pox has left behind through her reflective voice over the course of many years as she, and several other characters, travel north towards Canada to escape. Reviewing Olamina's trajectory, the reader becomes aware of two spatial motifs that anchor the novels—Walls and the Road.

Walls—Order

During the first half of *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina lives in a suburb of Los Angeles in a gated community called Robledo with her father, stepmother, two brothers, and a collection of other families. Everyone in the compound—a group comprised of

mostly blacks and Hispanics—must remain vigilant and ready to fight to stay alive. Outside of the gates, men, women, and children cannot be trusted as most people are scavengers for resources and will stop at nothing to access food, clean water, money, and weapons. With this in mind, the walls that enclose Robledo have been reinforced with barbed wire and adults in the community possess firearms to deter unwanted visitors.

The threat from outside Robledo's gates makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that this middle class oasis is likely unsustainable in the midst of society's breakdown. Olamina states early on in *Parable of the Sower*: "In L.A. some walled communities bigger and stronger than this one just aren't there anymore ... We'll die in here unless we get busy now."²³⁵ The adults in the community farm their own produce and leave the community from time to time to barter for resources on the outside. But, as reports from beyond the walls keep coming in, the reader learns that the middle class no longer exists. In a way, Olamina and her family are living in a fantasy where their walls will protect them from the reality that surrounds them.²³⁶ Recognizing the perilous position she and her family are in, Olamina takes an interest in learning survival techniques. While other family members criticize her actions as pessimistic, Olamina spends considerable time reading about how to endure outside Robledo. In fact, at age fifteen, she possessed "three books on survival in the wilderness, three on guns and shooting, two each on handling medical emergencies,

²³⁵ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1992), 55.

²³⁶ In this new world, corporations buy whole communities and offer protection in exchange for a modern version of indentured servitude. They tend to focus on traditionally white neighborhoods with skilled labor as these are the communities most interested in maintaining their economic status. Olamina's father states: "Robledo's too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone...no company will want us," *ibid.*, 120. Besides, Olamina and her family would be black debt slaves working for a white company.

California native and naturalized plants and their uses.”²³⁷ She even readies a survival bag filled with food, money, and other essentials that she keeps buried in case Robledo comes under siege and she has to make a quick getaway.

In her essay, “Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler’s *Parables* Series,” Hee-Jung Serenity Joo argues that walls in Butler’s *Parables* texts represent an effort by both middle class and wealthy US citizens to maintain a semblance of order in the midst of perceived chaos: “Walls serve as the spatial and narrative divide that delineates bureaucratic order from supposed natural chaos.”²³⁸ As the governing system no longer provides entitlements and public services, people are left to try their best to get their needs met on the open market. However, as Butler demonstrates, this leaves the rich, a predominantly white Christian population in Butler’s future world, with protections and services that a more diverse middle class simply cannot afford. Thus, a stark dichotomy emerges within society where the rich hoard all the resources and everyone else is left to fend for themselves. In other words, the white and the rich hide behind their walls to maintain security. The middle-class families, and more diverse families such as those living in Robledo, do so for as long as they can, but their walls are now nostalgic—in the sense that they represent a time when a mere gate was a signifier of a particular station in society.

²³⁷ Ibid., 57.

²³⁸ Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, “Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler’s *Parables* Series.” *Extrapolation* 52, no. 3 (2001): 282.

The Road—Chaos

Eventually, Olamina's community is attacked by outsiders looking for resources and most of the inhabitants are killed, including Olamina's family. Now an adult, Olamina survives Robledo's massacre along with two other people, Harry and Zahra. Initially, the three use old maps to follow the roads north toward Canada. It is during this time that Olamina learns first-hand about the threats that have been surrounding her little gated community. Zahra, a newer member to Robledo who has spent time without the protection of walls before, warns the other two that there are no ethics beyond Robledo: "Out here in the world, they kill little kids everyday."²³⁹ The three decide they must learn to avoid contact with other travelers on the road because anyone and everyone poses a threat.

Armed robbery is always a possibility, but there an even more alarming danger is rape or enslavement. In "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement," Madhu Daby articulates how the people who face the threat of sex slavery the most in the *Parable* series are black and Latina women.²⁴⁰ Seeking to help make their travels a bit safer, Olamina chooses to dress as a man and only reveals that she is a woman to people after they have proven that they can be trusted. In "The Relationship Between Community and Subjectivity in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," Clara Escoda Agusti argues that Olamina's decision to dress as a man does not render her identity as a woman invisible. Rather, this action demonstrates Olamina's understanding of gender categories as essentially performative and the body

²³⁹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 170.

²⁴⁰ Madhu Daby, "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement" *Novel* 46, no. 3 (2013): 359.

itself as a fluid space.²⁴¹ Agusti argues that Olamina refuses to accept the premise that bodies are imbued with biological determinism and that her given subject position of black woman is anything other than a social labeling used to maintain white patriarchy.

Thus, Olamina embraces a subject position that is liminal: “Olamina is able to blur the differences between subject and Other, manhood and femaleness in herself, in a way that difference is incorporated into the self.”²⁴² Agusti also emphasizes how Olamina might be more open to this notion of the liminal subject because of a condition she possesses called *hyperempathy*. In the *Parable* series, Olamina and several other individuals she encounters throughout the text were born with the ability to feel the suffering of others. People with hyperempathy received this condition because their mothers were addicted to a pill called Paracecto while pregnant. Exposure to the drug as a fetus makes it possible for Olamina to literally feel the physical pain of others who are beaten, shot, or even killed in her line of sight.

While this becomes a clear liability when travelling on the road, it also enables Olamina to actually incorporate the Other into her own body. In this sense, she fully understands the concept of seeing and feeling things from another’s perspective.²⁴³ Olamina sees that the generic categories of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status are not fixed. Instead, they are subject to change at all times depending on the circumstances. Therefore, in the *Parable* series, the road does not represent chaos, so much

²⁴¹ Clara Escoda Agusti, “The Relationship Between Community and Subjectivity in Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” *Extrapolation* 46, no. 3 (2005): 355.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 354.

²⁴³ Hyperempathy addresses Collins’ discussion of standpoint theory. If it is possible to see the world from another’s perspective—to literally feel their pain—it may also be possible to empathize more acutely with their standpoint on reality.

as change. When predominantly white gated communities sell their property to large corporations in exchange for higher walls and more security, they do so to maintain order. Inside their walls, an old twentieth-century socioeconomic ladder attempts to stop time—to stop change. But if Robledo serves as an example, the road remains just beyond the wall, filled with agents of change.

Subject: Planting Earthseed

Despite the dangers of the road, Olamina meets people along her travels and selectively develops relationships with them. Often these relationships are built as she shares selections from her journal—a collection of writings she has kept since when she was very young back at Robledo. These poetic lines speak of a new religion called Earthseed, of which Olamina is the founder. As a religion, Earthseed's primary tenet is that of change:

All that you touch
 You Change.
 All that you Change
 Changes you.
 The only lasting truth
 Is Change.
 God
 Is Change.²⁴⁴

Through much of *Parable of the Sower*, the reader witnesses Olamina utilize her charisma to recruit followers who eventually help her build a community dedicated to the principles of Earthseed called Acorn. In *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina's community has grown significantly under this new religion, but eventually Acorn is attacked by white

²⁴⁴ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 3.

Christian radicals and all of the community members who survive this invasion are enslaved. Living without the protections of a gated community, Olamina and her followers are forced to wear electric slave collars so they cannot escape. The women are sexually assaulted and everyone is required to do hard labor as part of a government-backed reeducation program for non-Christians.

As the story develops, Olamina and several survivors escape. They decide it is best to split up so as not to be caught again, forcing Olamina to spread the word about Earthseed through different means. Rather than create a compound that can be easily destroyed, such as Acorn, she decides to teach people she meets during her travels and allow them to spread the word on her behalf. This decentralized approach grows the popularity of Earthseed across the country until eventually, toward the end of *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina becomes a powerful and wealthy figure in her own right.

In relation to our earlier discussions regarding black feminism, Earthseed offers solutions to the very issues raised by Springer and Weheliye. Starting with Lubiano's notion of common sense black nationalism and how it limits the potentiality of black women, the Earthseed community of Acorn provides an excellent rebuttal. Once Acorn was established and running in *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina comes into contact with her long lost brother, Marc, and invites him to be a part of her Acorn community. Butler uses this opportunity to offer a critique of traditional black leadership models in the United States.

Back when they were younger living in Robeldo, their father, a Christian preacher who held services for the community, was the leader. Once Marc arrives at Acorn and heals from his time as a slave, Olamina informs him that the people of Acorn are her followers and that they all practice a new faith called Earthseed. Marc is also informed that they have

Gatherings where all of Acorn comes together to practice their new faith. These Gatherings are less of a worship service than they are an opportunity to engage in questions about the nature of God. Marc, seeing an opportunity to reach presumed heathens, attempts to bring the Christian faith to the people of Acorn the way their father once did. Olamina warns him that such a proposition is not a good idea because their Gatherings are not like church services.

But Marc insists, “I’m not out to teach a class. I want to preach a sermon.”²⁴⁵ Olamina responds to Marc, “That’s not our way, Marc. If you speak, you have to face questions and discussion. You need to be ready for that. Besides, no matter what you call it, a good sermon is just a lesson that you’re trying to teach.”²⁴⁶ Sure enough, once Marc’s sermon is over, the community questions everything that he said. To close his sermon Marc quotes Malachi: “For I am the Lord. I change not,” to which a member of Acorn named Jorge responds, “We believe that all things change ... even though things don’t necessarily change in all ways. Why do you believe God doesn’t change?”²⁴⁷ When Marc is unable to respond adequately to the onslaught of questions, he gets frustrated and decides that he needs to leave Acorn.

In this scene, Butler’s juxtaposition of two siblings, Olamina and Marc, represents the tension between what Lubiano terms the common sense of black nationalism and black feminist thought. When Marc enters the new community of Acorn, rather than attempt to conform to the norms of a new community, he fights against its unfamiliarity. In this instance, the clash is not necessarily between the Christian faith and Earthseed, but between

²⁴⁵ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 149.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

the two systems of thought embodied the siblings. Marc represents traditional models of leadership in black communities as represented by the black male preacher. This is so familiar to him that even during the apocalypse, he sees a community that does not have such a leader as incomplete and inappropriate.

In contrast, Olamina's community of Acorn represents one possible world if the conventional systems of leadership in the black community are stripped away. In the absence of an oppressive black male presence, Butler imagines a community that is not hierarchical so much as relational. Olamina does not force anyone to accept the principles of her faith or her community; rather, the people are encouraged to question authority at every turn and accept Earthseed on their own terms. The result is a community established by a black female leader, but also one that holds its leaders accountable. There is no common sense black nationalism because every aspect of Olamina's philosophy of leadership is an open book that encourages questioning. If someone wants to live at Acorn but not be a follower of Earthseed, they are welcome. If someone wants to follow the Earthseed faith, then they have made a commitment to critique all notions of common sense.

Springer's appropriation of Belinda Robnett's *bridge leadership* is also relevant to Butler's *Parable* series. As described by Springer, *bridge leadership* is the alternative form of leadership that black women often practice under common sense black nationalism. During the Civil Rights Movement, for example, where most of the documented leaders of the movement were black men, black women were consistently faced with the challenge of organizing the people to collectively act towards a common goal as articulated by the male "leaders." Springer suggests that these women who were able to mobilize people practiced *bridge leadership* because they acted as the connective tissue between the movement's

objectives and the people's desire to act towards those objectives. These women did not always receive the credit that they deserve for their roles in the movement, but their leadership was consequential.

In *Parable of the Talents*, *bridge leadership* takes on a different role once Acorn has been destroyed. Olamina is forced to abandon her original model for Earthseed, where there is a stationary community of followers, in favor of a mobile movement where she engages people on a personal basis. This new approach requires that she introduce would-be initiates to Earthseed and then allow them to practice its principles without her expert guidance. This is a significant shift from the way she ran the Acorn community. Though everyone within the compound was encouraged to question Olamina's claims about Earthseed, Olamina was still the leader of the community. This is why Marc felt the desire to challenge her authority. He wanted to reestablish the common sense norm where a Christian man leads his flock.

Springer highlights how models of social movement theory continues to overlook forms of leadership that do not reinforce hierarchy. In *Parable of the Talents*, for the sake of the spread of Earthseed, Olamina is forced to relinquish her role at the top of a hierarchical structure and assume an interstitial role where she connects people directly to the principles of Earthseed rather than become their pastor. In his text, "Butler's (R)evolutionary Movement," David Morris describes how Olamina modeled her first attempt at spreading Earthseed on conventional black leadership models. But in the new world marked by the breakdown of society, these models no longer work: "The remnants of civil rights movement organizing—embodied in Olamina's father, Laurence, a Baptist preacher who organizes in a combination of Southern black Christianity and West Coast,

Black Panther-style self-defense—provide a leadership rendered irrelevant when the community is destroyed.” Morris describes how when society’s structure falls apart, “there is nowhere to hold a sit in, nowhere to march on, and no one watching to spread the news.”²⁴⁸

When she encounters a similar lack of structure in the middle of nowhere, Olamina is forced to imagine alternatives to this model. Morris describes this new model as parasitic. Appropriating language from the French philosopher Michel Serres, Morris explains the parasitic model by recalling a fable about an uninvited guest coming to dinner and “exchanging stories, conviviality, and novelty for energy and production—that is, for the energy provided by food and for the food provided by the process of production.”²⁴⁹ In Morris’s fable, the uninvited guest interrupts the previous relationship established prior to their arrival between the diners and the food. In this way, they function as a parasite siphoning nourishment for themselves.

To illustrate this point further, Morris cites an example in the text when Olamina approaches an old widow, Nia, who lives alone in a house. Sensing that this woman is very lonely and learning that she was once an elementary school teacher, Olamina informs Nia about Earthseed’s commitment to teaching children. Inspired by Olamina’s words, Nia agrees to support the Earthseed movement by taking in orphaned children from Acorn. Morris describes this scene as parasitic because Olamina interrupts the relationship between Nia and her home, and in the process, transforms the relationship such that it

²⁴⁸ David Morris, “Octavia Butler’s (R)evolutionary Movement for the Twenty-First Century,” *Utopian Studies* 26, no. 2 (October 2015): 281.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

works toward Olamina's objectives. I argue that this model is more closely related to *bridge leadership*.

One aspect of this scene that Morris does not mention is Nia's initial sexual attraction to Olamina. As stated earlier, when traveling outside of the compound, Olamina dresses as a man to avoid the threat of being robbed or raped on the road. Upon first meeting Nia, Olamina is aware that the looks she receives from Nia are marked by desire. After finally informing Nia that she is not a man they embrace and Olamina thinks to herself: "[S]he needed to be hugged and held, needed to cry in someone's arms. She'd been alone far too long. To my own surprise, I realized under other circumstances, I might have taken her to bed. ... But that wasn't the relationship that I needed between us."²⁵⁰ This interaction between Nia and Olamina is significant because it represents a significant development in Olamina's character.

Until this point in the *Parable* series, Olamina had never informed outsiders of her actual gender. The minute that her childhood gated community was destroyed, to unknown passersby, she was always a man first and then a woman once they could be trusted. Thus, oftentimes when she introduces Earthseed to would-be followers for the first time, she does so as a man. In this instance though, she decides to trust Nia with the secret of her gender after only one day and shares Earthseed with her as herself. This is pertinent because it represents the last shedding of an old patriarchal model of social movements. At Acorn she introduced a new faith practice but still employed a hierarchical model where she was the leader of the community, like her father. After Acorn was destroyed, she started travelling

²⁵⁰ Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 370.

the streets the way she had before. However, rather than spread Earthseed as a man, she sheds the last remnants of an old model and assumes a *bridge leadership* role as a black woman.

While Morris's framing of the parasitic model is productive, I argue Olamina's approach is more in line with Springer's articulation of *bridge leadership* because without a dedicated group of followers, there is no community to lead. Instead, she approaches new followers of Earthseed, like Nia, and assumes an interstitial space between the principles and objectives of Earthseed and a person's own desires. Much like the women discussed in Springer's text, Olamina begins to organize people through relationships and common interests. In this context, there is no longer a need for a traditional leader. Instead, people have the capacity to practice Earthseed in accordance with their own will because they have been placed in alignment by Olamina.

Weheliye's use of Spiller's *Flesh* speaks to a desire for a new form of epistemology where black women are not just acknowledged for their contributions to social movements, but their theoretical framings about the universe are considered just as valuable as those offered by white men. In fact, Weheliye's text even signals that such an epistemology might mean the end of the world, seeing as our collective reality is so entrenched in white male patriarchy. Such a shift in reality demands a complete overhaul in the way that men and women think about themselves and each other. Olamina's Earthseed offers a solution to this dilemma by suggesting that humans can only begin to make this shift through an evolution of the mind and the body.

In the appendix to *Parable of the Sower*, Butler writes briefly about how she develops her futuristic narratives. She states that as it relates to the *Parable* series, she was primarily interested in depicting a future that looks "at where we are now, what we are doing now,

and to consider where some of our current behaviors and unattended problems might take us.”²⁵¹ In particular, she wanted to understand how global warming would affect food prices, water access, carbon dioxide levels, and the spread of disease. In other novels, such as those included in the *Xenogenesis* series, Butler was primarily interested in how essential human characteristics might eventually lead to our demise in the future. She states, “Our problem as a species ... results from our having two inherited characteristics that don’t work and play well together, especially since the wrong one is in control. The two characteristics are intelligence and hierarchical behavior—with hierarchical behavior dominant.”²⁵²

I argue that Butler’s *Parable* series continues to grapple with the dire implications of these two characteristics. Moreover, simply acknowledging that these characteristics have potentially led humans to neglect global warming and in the process give rise to the Pox is not enough to solve the problem. Instead, humans need to rid themselves of this imbalance by evolving. In *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina states: “There seem to be solid biological reasons why we are the way we are. If there weren’t, the cycles wouldn’t keep replaying. The human species is a kind of animal, of course. But we can do something no other animal species has ever had the option to do. We can choose ... we can grow up.”²⁵³

In the context of the *Parable* series, growing up means embracing change and evolving as a species. In order to evolve, followers of Earthseed must work towards the Destiny. Olamina says: “We can leave the nest. We can fulfill the Destiny, make homes for ourselves among the stars, and become some combination of what we want to become and

²⁵¹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 337.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 338.

²⁵³ Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 358.

whatever our new environments challenge us to become.”²⁵⁴ As David Morris argues in his text, Olamina’s proclamation proposes that Earthseed is about more than simply advocating that God is Change. Rather, Earthseed is a campaign to engage in space travel for the explicit purpose of fundamentally changing the human species such that a cycle of violence and inequality is broken. Morris argues:

This hope for social change and biological change together marks the excess that pushes Earthseed out of the realm of secular movements and into the religious. The new worlds will remake the people—they will challenge people in social terms but also invite new sociobiological adaptations that will change the human species.²⁵⁵

Butler’s texts advocate for the end of the world and a trip to the stars in order to allow for a new way of interacting with each other, a new way of being, a new epistemology.

In this context, Earthseed is a diegetic prototype that leads to the development of space travel and subsequent human evolution. Towards the end of *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina has become an important and wealthy member of society, but despite her efforts, humans haven’t yet reached space. She and her followers have raised enough money and garnered enough political backing to initiate a travel exhibition to Mars where followers of Earthseed will have the opportunity to fulfill the Destiny. Unfortunately, Butler died before she was able to finish the *Parable* series and provide readers with a glimpse of what such an epistemology might look like. But, as discussed earlier, Butler is not the only person to consider an apocalypse an opportunity for the birth of new possibilities. Sun Ra provides a

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Morris, “Octavia Butler’s (R)evolutionary Moment,” 278.

vivid picture of what new forms of epistemology look like once a person has achieved the Destiny through the use of yet another diegetic prototype, The Space Chord.

Playing the Space Chord:

Sun Ra, Myth, and Forging Black Secret Technologies

The name can be music played by infinite
instruments, The name can lift splendor-
vision from nothing on to reality-myth
It is the myth of everything that is nothing
It is the nothing that never knew that
was of oneness bounds ...

—Sun Ra, “The Name Sound” (1972)

In this chapter, I analyze Sun Ra’s 1974 film, *Space is the Place*, with particular attention to the implementation of a diegetic prototype called the Space Chord. I investigate how Sun Ra uses this form of technology to forge a new mythology that defies conventional notions of time and space. I read the Space Chord’s function through the lens of David Walker’s *Appeal to Colored Citizens of the World* and Michelle Wright’s *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. These texts provide innovative commentaries on how time, space, and the imagination function to animate blackness in the United States. Though Sun Ra is primarily recognized as a musician, this chapter does not provide an analysis of Sun Ra’s music, so much as contextualize the role it plays within the larger narrative Sun Ra fashions about himself and its relative significance to AF. Sun Ra’s contributions to jazz are important and are written about at length by authors such as John Corbett, John Swzed, and Paul Youngquist. While I refer to these writers in this chapter, I focus on aspects of their texts that highlight parts Sun Ra’s biography, which is often left out in discourse on AF.

Given World: Sun Ra Off Stage

In 1971, Sun Ra taught a class at the University of California, Berkeley in the Afro-American Studies department titled “The Black Man in the Cosmos.”²⁵⁶ Although at the time, and to this day, Sun Ra was primarily known around the world for his contributions to jazz,²⁵⁷ he provided a syllabus for this course that included only one text on music and focused primarily on the themes of black literature, etymology, theology, and astrology.²⁵⁸ Several of the texts in this syllabus are quite rare and obscure. For example, Sun Ra assigned *Stylus 13:1*—a student journal out of Temple University that is no longer cataloged in any university database—and Christine R. Blackie’s, *Geographical Etymology: A Dictionary of Place Names Giving their Derivations*, a late-nineteenth-century dictionary of place names from Celtic languages. Although other texts, such as Henry Dumas’s short story “Ark of Bones” are better known, this assortment of readings is curious considering Sun Ra was known as a popular jazz musician—not an archivist or a scholar.

Contemporary literature on Sun Ra places him in a long tradition of black people who have used different forms of technology to liberate themselves and their constituencies from the oppression marked by American racism and white patriarchy. As discussed in the

²⁵⁶ John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 294.

²⁵⁷ Sun Ra and his band, the Arkestra, have been written about at length by music critics such as Greg Tate, Kodwo Eshun, and John Corbett regarding their innovative use of synthesizers and other studio-based technologies to produce electronic sounds in jazz. See: Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

²⁵⁸ To view a list of the texts offered on the syllabus, see “Sun Ra’s Full Lecture & Reading List From His 1971 UC Berkeley Course, “The Black Man in the Cosmos,”” *Open Culture*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.openculture.com/2014/07/full-lecture-and-reading-list-from-sun-ras-1971-uc-berkeley-course.html>; see also John Szwed’s *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 294.

introduction, in 1994, British cultural critic Mark Dery coined this tradition Afro-futurism in his book on cyber-culture titled, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber-Culture*:

Speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called “Afrofuturism.”²⁵⁹

A year later, John Akomfrah of the *Black Audio Film Collective* directed a video essay titled, *The Last Angel of History*, in which he investigates this same historical tradition in twentieth-century black music. The film asserts that the famed musician Robert Johnson received a “black secret technology”²⁶⁰ from the Devil at a crossroads called the Blues. The film recalls a story where hundreds of years into the future a computer hacker, named the Data Thief, uses this same evolved technology of black music to find the keys to the future. In recent years, scholars such as Alondra Nelson and Beth Coleman have written extensively on the topic of blackness and how technology is used as a liberating force by individuals who fall under Dery’s classification of “Afrofuturist.”²⁶¹

In the year 2017, AF has become a catchphrase for nearly all forms of black speculative fiction in various forms of media production. I argue that AF’s contemporary popularity is indebted to the work of Sun Ra. Today regarded as a seminal figure in the

²⁵⁹ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

²⁶⁰ In an essay titled “Black Secret Technology,” Ben Williams refers to the development of Detroit Techno as a black secret technology because the origins of this music, founded by musicians such as Juan Atkins and Derrick May, remain unrecognized by the US public despite having incredible influence across the globe. See Nelson, Alondra, et al., *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, 2001.

²⁶¹ See Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology,” *Camera Obscura* 70 24, no. 1 (2009): 177–207; Alondra Nelson, ed., “Afrofuturism,” special issue, *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002).

culture, when Sun Ra taught a class in 1971 on such esoteric knowledge his students probably expected a course more closely associated with the themes of black identity, technology, music, and the future. I argue that AF's contemporary concerns with the aforementioned themes, particularly the idea of a black secret technology, is the result of a secularization of a long-standing black *mystical* tradition referenced intentionally by Sun Ra in an effort to appeal to a broader audience. Key to the success of this tradition, as orchestrated by Sun Ra, is that its function remain veiled in secrecy. In this chapter I illuminate this *black secret mysticism* starting with a comparison between Sun Ra's intellectual project with that of the early-nineteenth-century black abolitionist, David Walker.

David Walker's Appeal

In 1829, a free black man in Boston, Massachusetts named David Walker wrote a pamphlet called *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. In this text, Walker identifies what he believes to be the greatest problem facing the United States, the institution of slavery. Walker wrote this pamphlet as a message to black people (free and enslaved) to rise up from their lowly positions in society and fight against this system of inequality both physically and mentally. In a physical sense, Walker encourages slave uprisings and cites several incidents such as the 1791 slave revolt in Haiti,²⁶² as prime examples of how to combat white slave owners. Walker even advocates killing black people who actively aid

²⁶² Walker informs his black readers to “read the history particularly of Hayti” and prepare for the time when another leader, blessed by God, will lead the slaves to fight against slavery. See David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured People of the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 24.

white owners in suppressing such revolts, as they will hinder the freedom of other black people: “*Any* person who will save such wretches²⁶³ from destruction, is fighting against the Lord, and will receive his just recompense.”²⁶⁴

Walker also writes that education is key for black liberation, stating that one of the most frightening ideas in the world to white slave owners is that black people will gain an education: “The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death.”²⁶⁵ He suggests that white slave owners intentionally keep black people ignorant so that they remain unaware of the lies told to keep them in bondage: “It is notorious fact, that the major part of white Americans, have, ever since we have been among them, tried to keep us ignorant, and make us believe that God made us and our children to be slaves to them and theirs.”²⁶⁶ Education is so important for Walker because it is through literacy that black people will be made aware of their full potential in the world.²⁶⁷

Perhaps most important for Walker, literacy would allow black people to read the Bible for themselves and discover that God has not forsaken them. In this light, Walker’s *Appeal* is just as much a theological debate as it is a political one. The pamphlet makes consistent comparisons between the moral proclamations of the Bible and how white Christians treat their slaves: “Did God not make us all as it seemed best to himself? What right, then, has one of us, to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his

²⁶³ Walker refers to white owners.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶⁷ He encourages literate slaves to read his book and teach others to read it too because education will help them see through the lies told about documents like the Bible about their lowly station in life.

colour? ... Can there be a greater absurdity in nature ... in a free republican country?"²⁶⁸

Despite what the scriptures may say, Walker describes how it is common practice, even among people as reputable as Thomas Jefferson, to assert that slavery is justifiable through scripture.

As referenced by Walker, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782), Jefferson justifies slavery by claiming that present-day slavery is actually far less difficult for the slaves than it was during the time of ancient Egypt.²⁶⁹ In response, Walker argues that if one were to actually read the Bible, they would see that there is no Biblical justification for the enslavement of black people in the scriptures whatsoever. In his own exegesis, Walker posits that the Egyptians of the Bible "were Africans or coloured people, such as we are."²⁷⁰ This is significant because it proves that black people were not always slaves and, at one point in history, ruled their own nations. Additionally, Walker refers to the story of Joseph, an Israelite (a member of a slave class in ancient Egypt), whom the Pharaoh allows to marry an Egyptian priest's daughter named Asenath.²⁷¹ Walker notes how in nineteenth-century America there were laws prohibiting slaves and free black people from marrying white people. Drawing on this example and many others, Walker concludes that slavery in the Bible only makes American slavery look even more evil if an educated person reads the scriptures thoroughly.²⁷²

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 42.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 9.

²⁷² Of course, there are many factors that are different between slavery in ancient Egypt and slavery in nineteenth-century America. Walker compares the two to demonstrate the immorality of miscegenation laws and to critique Jefferson. But race as a social identifier in ancient Egypt is not analogous to how race was perceived during Walker's time.

In concluding, Walker predicts a future where black people rise up against their oppressors and recognize that “this country is as much ours as it is the whites, whether they will admit it now or not, they will see and believe it by and by.”²⁷³ In this light, Walker warns white people that they should repent or they will end up like the ancient Egyptians did when God took the side of the Israelites in the Old Testament.

In the introduction to the twenty-third printing of Walker’s *Appeal* in 1995, historian Sean Wilentz describes the many challenges Walker faced trying to get his message out to the public in pre-Civil War America. As articulated in the *Appeal*, black people were not even allowed to read in many states, let alone publish abolitionist literature and pass it out to the slaves. An even greater challenge for Walker was that he lived in Boston but wanted his pamphlet to reach the slaves in the Southern states. Walker had to devise a plan that would allow his pamphlet to travel across states lines without leaving a trace of where the forbidden text originated. According to Wilentz, if a white slave owner in the South were to discover other slaves reading Walker’s *Appeal*, not only would the pamphlet be destroyed, but Walker’s life would also be in danger. Walker solved this problem by using one of the most efficient forms of technology available in 1829 to disseminate his pamphlet, the ship.²⁷⁴

As a used-clothing storeowner in Boston located near the port docks, Walker was in regular contact with sailors and ship stewards. In these men, both black and white,

²⁷³ Ibid., 55.

²⁷⁴ In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), Paul Gilroy discusses how the ship represents both trauma and freedom for black people during the time of slavery. On one hand, the ship was a cruel reminder of the Middle Passage where Africans were transported across the Atlantic to become slaves. On the other hand, ships also acted as windows into other worlds through the constant flux of new people, foods, products, and cultural practices. The opportunity to interact with these elements, or travel on the ship to different locations, provided slaves with a sense of freedom.

Walker found a perfect distribution line to the Southern ports of the United States. To maintain anonymity and protect his pamphlets against port checks for contraband, Walker stitched the pamphlets into the lining of used clothing sold to the sailors.²⁷⁵ Using this method, Walker was able to spread his call to action across the South through ports in Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans.²⁷⁶ Over the next year, Walker's *Appeal* had an effect. By 1830, after publication of the third edition of the pamphlet, legal authorities throughout the South had placed prices on Walker's head.²⁷⁷ On August 3 that same year Walker died mysteriously in his Boston home.²⁷⁸

Walker's story is significant to our discussion of Sun Ra for several reasons. First, his *Appeal* involves a critical reinterpretation of the Bible. Not only does he suggest that white slave owners who preach Christianity are moral hypocrites, but he also associates the black slave experience with that of the Israelite slaves in ancient Egypt. Walker draws on this comparison to suggest that white people repent for their sins because eventually God will strike them down like the ancient Egyptians who were punished in the Bible for their sins against humanity.²⁷⁹ In addition, remaining consistent with contemporary conversations about AF, Walker used the best available technology at his disposal—the ship—to spread his message about the future across the country. Finally, the power of

²⁷⁵ Walker, *Appeal*, xiv.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁷⁷ Wilentz describes in the "Introduction" how Southerners put a price on Walker's head for \$3000 and \$10,000 if he were delivered to the South alive (xix).

²⁷⁸ Wilentz notes that many of Walker's friends asked him to flee the country to Canada. Refusing to leave, Walker died on August 3, 1830, just a few days after his daughter passed. It is unclear precisely why Walker died although Wilentz describes how many people assumed it was murder at the time (xix).

²⁷⁹ Walker, *Appeal*, 43.

Walker's *Appeal* is not found in its loud proclamations, but rather in the secrecy that surrounds it.

Prior to authoring his *Appeal*, Walker was a contributor to *Freedom's Journal*, an early-nineteenth-century abolitionist newspaper for both blacks and whites.²⁸⁰ Although this journal afforded Walker the opportunity to speak on racial inequalities, the platform did not allow for the more biting commentary that he included in his own pamphlet. According to Wilentz, Walker's support of slave insurrection would not have gone over well with either the newspaper's readers or its editors because "most northern anti-slavery men ... had pointedly discouraged talk of law-breaking and violence, preferring moral suasion to physical force."²⁸¹ With the freedom that came from acting independently as an anonymous author transporting banned books across the southern states through clandestine methods, Walker produced a text that was so notorious it still echoes in the twenty-first century.

Sun Ra's Intellectual Pursuits

In most scholarship tying Sun Ra to AF, commentary is focused on his music and his autobiographical sci-fi narrative. I trace Sun Ra's connection to AF to a time before he incorporated his band's recording label El Saturn Records in 1957, when he started a research collective called Ihnfinity, Inc. in 1953.²⁸² An investigation into the development of this research collective will demonstrate how Sun Ra's intellectual project and even his

²⁸⁰ Ibid., xiii.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 75.

method of distributing the findings of this collective are strikingly similar to those of David Walker. In *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra biographer, John Szwed, describes how when Sun Ra moved from Birmingham to Chicago in the mid-1940s, he started to read the Bible with a critical eye. Diving into biblical scholarship, Sun Ra discovered that the Bible was an assortment of different texts that had been edited over centuries and that certain documents had even been left out. Clearly a very influential book, he became concerned that there were seemingly very few black people in it. Moreover, when black people were mentioned, like the descendants of Ham in Egypt, they “were treated disrespectfully or pushed to the margins of the story.”²⁸³

Szwed describes how Sun Ra started reading a number of these rejected biblical texts, as well as other supplemental publications,²⁸⁴ that told different stories about the role Egypt played in the ancient world. For example, Sun Ra read several books by an Alsatian philosopher named R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz. Szwed describes how this famous occultist lived in Egypt for fifteen years and argued that the ancient Egyptians were not godless heathens, but were actually world travellers at the cutting edge of science and spirituality who inhabited several different locations around the globe during their own time. Furthermore, Schwaller describes how the secrets to their advanced religious and scientific practices were “stored materially and symbolically in its architecture, most of which was lost when a later decadent civilization deliberately effaced and dismantled it.”²⁸⁵ The idea that the secrets to ancient Egyptian mythology were hidden in architecture and symbols all

²⁸³ Ibid., 64.

²⁸⁴ Szwed mentions that Sun Ra became very interested in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 70.

over the world interested Sun Ra so much so that he started reading the Bible for its hidden meanings.

Szwed describes how these findings allowed Sun Ra to read the Bible in rather innovative ways. For example, if the text was an edited volume, he found no reason for which he could not start in the middle and read out, or read the entire thing backwards.²⁸⁶ Also taking an interest in etymology, Sun Ra started to reinterpret the meanings of words in the Bible, attempting to locate their hidden messages. Sun Ra became so obsessed with this project that he began a research group with his longtime business manager, Alton Abraham, in 1953. Ilnfinity Inc. was dedicated to the exploration of theology, astrology, and etymology. Through this research, Sun Ra came to the conclusion that:

The ancient world ... was less a place than a myth. White people who made claims on it for themselves often did so in the same terms as black people. And though they wrapped their self-serving myths in science and scholarship and made "race" do their bidding, when [Sun Ra] looked closely it seemed nothing more than testifying, as in church.²⁸⁷

In this way, the imagination became a crucial tool for Sun Ra because, if applied correctly, it could allow black people to reread the Bible and see that they were not at the margins of its stories, but rather at the center. Indeed, Sun Ra chose to create a myth where it was black culture that had influenced the world, just as much if not more than white culture.

For Sun Ra, this message was not simply an intellectual endeavor; it became his mission in life to inform black people of their role in the world. Szwed describes how he

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 64.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 71.

actually saw himself as “a secret agent of the Creator” put on planet Earth to teach black people a new way of seeing their own history through the power of imagination.²⁸⁸ During the early 1950s, in order to get this message out to the public, Ihnfinity Inc.—co-founded with friend and business partner Alton Abraham—published pamphlets and passed them out in Chicago across from the Nation of Islam headquarters.²⁸⁹ The contents of these pamphlets were quite esoteric, referencing ancient texts and themes that the average person would never be able to identify.²⁹⁰ However, as a jazz musician with a rather large band called the Arkestra, Sun Ra saw music as another avenue through which he could get his message out to the public that was far easier for people to receive.

Sun Ra believed that music is a language, and just like the written word in the Bible, it too could possess hidden messages. In one of Sun Ra’s lectures at UC Berkeley in 1971, he “wrote biblical quotes on the board and then ‘permutated’ them—rewrote and transformed their letters and syntax into new equations of meaning.”²⁹¹ After revealing the words’ secret messages, Sun Ra stated that hidden meanings of language affect people whether they are aware of them or not.²⁹² He gives the example of how certain dead languages like ancient Latin and Egyptian are no longer spoken, but the sounds and words are pronounced by people all the time unintentionally.²⁹³ He argues that just because people are unaware of the

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 109.

²⁸⁹ Szwed describes how the two groups’ philosophies were actually quite similar. Szwed also discusses how the two groups indulged in rigorous debates in Washington Park. See *ibid.*, 106.

²⁹⁰ Szwed provides a facsimile of a page from one such pamphlet titled “Secret Keys to Biblical Interpretation Leading to the Eternal Being.” The contents of this page consist of a nine-row number codex for which, ironically, there is no key. See *ibid.*, 76.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁹² Sun Ra, “Sun Ra Speaks: The Power of Words Part 1,” *The Sun Ra Music Archive*, June 23, 2014 [1971], YouTube video, 28:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cfy2BpbkGe8>.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

meaning of their utterances, it does not mean that the words lose their power. Sun Ra took this same principle and applied it to his music. Just as David Walker hid his biblical reinterpretation in the linings of used clothing, Sun Ra and his Arkestra stitched their own *black secret mysticism* into the fabric of their music.

Although it is probable that few people, if any, who were not part of Ilnfinity Inc. had a clue what the music actually meant, for Sun Ra, this was unimportant. Sun Ra was never shy in talking about his particular influences or his interest in theology. After all, his name Sun Ra (legal name: Le Sony'r Ra) means God two times²⁹⁴ and the band's name the Arkestra, references the biblical story of Noah's ark. However, the switch from passing out pamphlets to playing music infused with his message meant that Sun Ra was able to get his word out to people who would otherwise have no interest in his particular brand of theology. Szwed states: "With music he could reach across the border of reality into myth; with music he could build a bridge to another dimension, to something better; dance halls, clubs, and theaters could be turned into sacred shrines."²⁹⁵

Unlike David Walker, Sun Ra's black secret mysticism remains a secret to a majority of listeners. It hides in plain sight because of the medium that he used to distribute it. Covered in the guise of SF narrative, synthesizers, and shiny Egyptian-inspired outfits, Sun Ra flaunts the esoteric nature of his mysticism. But like a trickster, he never tells his listeners what he is up to. Instead, through his codes and hidden meanings, he allows his *black secret mysticism* to be co-opted and 'permuted' into a *black secret technology*, known the world

²⁹⁴ 'Re-Ra' in ancient Egyptian is both the male and female name of God. See Szwed, 83.

²⁹⁵ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 109.

over as AF—a primarily artistic and philosophical movement that is rarely even associated with a religious practice or mythology.

Presently, Afrofuturism has become what Samuel R. Delany calls a neologism for the world of black speculative fiction, or put simply, the black imaginary.²⁹⁶ But for Sun Ra, getting black people to imagine a new past is the key to envisioning a bearable present and hopeful future. In this light, unintentionally, Afrofuturism becomes the secularized neologism for a black mystical tradition that goes back at least as far as Walker's *Appeal*, where black philosophers reimagine the ancient world with the purpose of prosthetically enhancing the future of their people.

Object: Space is the Place

As previously stated, Sun Ra participates in a tradition of black intellectuals and artists who use technology to liberate themselves and others from the oppressive forces of racism and patriarchy. This tradition, now called AF, is commonly associated with popular icons that employ SF themes in their work such as Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany. Likewise, Sun Ra is at the forefront of these conversations as his greatest claim to fame, outside of his avant-garde jazz, is his relentless insistence that he was not born Herman Poole Blount in 1914 Alabama, but was instead an alien from Saturn. In 1974, he starred in a film called *Space is the Place* that essentially showed him, an alien, traveling by spaceship to Earth with the sole purpose of saving black people from the perils of racism. By the end

²⁹⁶ See, Paul D. Miller, "Plexus Nexus: Samuel R. Delany's Pataphysics," *DJSpooky.com*, 2013, <http://djspooky.com/plexus-nexus-samuel-r-delanys-pataphysics/>.

of the film, the viewer witnesses Sun Ra fitting as many black people into his spaceship as possible and returning to outer space, presumably never to be seen again.

Szwed states that prior to 1974, PBS producers had approached the famous jazz musician to make a documentary about him and his band, the Arkestra. While this project never materialized, eventually a director named John Coney partnered with Sun Ra to create an entirely different film that was “part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic.”²⁹⁷ The film begins with Sun Ra traveling through outer space in search of a planet that can be inhabited by all of Earth’s black people. Sun Ra wants to relocate black people to a new planet because he feels that they will live better lives without any white people around. After locating a suitable planet for his purposes, Sun Ra takes his space ship back to Earth and engages in an epic battle (in the form of an unidentifiable card game) with an Oakland pimp named the Overseer for the souls of all the black folk on Earth. Despite many challenges along the way, Sun Ra wins the battle and proceeds to transport as many black people as he can to a new safe haven on the other side of the galaxy.

The majority of *Space is the Place* takes place in an environment similar to the Given World of the viewer. The film was released in 1974 and the world depicted in the film is that of the 1970s. Moreover, the genre conventions of these film also adhere to the popular brand of black film during the early 1970s called Blaxploitation as referenced by Szwed. In *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, the film scholar, Ed Guerrero, discusses the rise and fall of the Blaxploitation era in which the majority of films were

²⁹⁷ Szwed, *Space Is the Place*, 330.

produced between 1970 and 1974. Guerrero argues that Blaxploitation gained popularity for many reasons including a failing Hollywood profit margin for big-budget films and the growth of an untapped black audience eager for an alternative to Sidney Poitier's popular image of black respectability politics.

As a result, films with cheap budgets were produced with the purpose of exploiting a black viewership who were ready for a new kind of storyline. Following the commercial success of Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1970) and Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971), Guerrero argues that a formulaic Blaxploitation model was adhered to by production teams throughout the early 1970s in order to capitalize on their perceived audience. Thus, Blaxploitation films generally consisted of "a pimp, gangster, or their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or retribution motif against corrupt whites in the romanticized confines of the ghetto or inner city."²⁹⁸ These plots also featured "liberal doses of gratuitous sex and drugs and the representation of whites as the very inscription of evil."²⁹⁹ Guerrero also points out that because they were cheaply produced, the quality of these films was often quite poor. Conversely, where quality may have lacked in the how the film was shot, the script, or the delivery of its lines, he makes note that these features were accompanied by "alluring visuals and aggrandized sartorial fashions of the black underworld," as well as "black musical scores that were usually of better quality than the films they energized."³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 94.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

With this in mind, Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* certainly utilizes several key elements from Guerrero's Blaxploitation model. The flashy outfits, particularly those worn by the Arkestra, the musical score produced by a famous black artist, the negative depiction of white people, and the references to the black underworld clearly place Sun Ra's film in conversation with the Blaxploitation genre. In contrast, where pimps, gratuitous sex, and violence are regularly presented romantically in Blaxploitation, Sun Ra's film frames these themes as major problems facing the future of black people throughout the film. In fact, the Overseer, a pimp, is the film's main antagonist. Thus, Sun Ra's film departs from the Blaxploitation genre in regards to the main villain. Although Sun Ra's character clearly states throughout *Space is the Place* that he wants to liberate black people from white people, he also makes a scathing critique of what he sees as a competing oppression in the allures of the black pimp and the lifestyle he has come to represent cinematically during the Blaxploitation era.

Beyond the genre conventions of the film, many of the major differences between the universe of *Space is the Place* and the Given World of the viewer are developed during the very first scenes. Throughout the opening credits, the viewer witnesses Sun Ra walk the terrain of an unknown planet, presumably Saturn, a location he repeatedly claims as his birthplace in numerous interviews. This planet is tropical in nature (clearly quite different than the Saturn recognizable to contemporary astrophysicists) as evidenced by the plethora of green foliage, towering tree trunks, and chirping bird sounds. Many of the planets and trees look unlike any indigenous to the planet Earth because of their shape, size, and color. In fact, one of the plants with a tall stem appears to blossom into a bright yellow shape like a human hand. Rather than rain, the viewer sees bubbles fall from the sky sporadically

throughout this first scene. Sun Ra is also followed by a floating piece of technology with a clear dome that makes a series of beeping sounds not unlike those made famous by R2D2 in the *Star Wars* films.

After a brief stroll, Sun Ra stands and speaks to an unannounced figure across from him dressed in a black robe with a mirror for a face. He states:

The music is different here, the vibrations are different, not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration. There's no one to talk to on planet Earth who would understand. We'll set up a colony for black people here, see what they can do on a planet all their own without any white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet ... [it] would affect their vibrations for the better of course.³⁰¹

In this quote, Sun Ra makes an important distinction between the universe he inhabits in the film and the Given World of the viewer. Namely, in Sun Ra's story, not only does he possess the technology to travel to and from Saturn (something contemporary scientists have yet to accomplish), but he also suggests that planets and their inhabitants have their own vibrations, or unique signatures, that differentiate them from each other. In this scene, Sun Ra also makes a social critique suggesting that the solution to black people's struggle for equality might lay outside of a traditional social movement. Instead, perhaps black liberation is something that can be accomplished through alternative means of action: "The first thing to do equation-wise is to consider time officially ended. We'll work on the other side of time. We'll bring them here either through isotope teleportation, transmolecularization, or better still, teleport the whole planet here through music."³⁰²

³⁰¹ John Coney, dir., *Space is the Place* (North American Star System, 1974).

³⁰² Ibid.

Following this scene, Sun Ra uses his avant-garde jazz in two distinct instances to demonstrate the power of music to affect human vibrations. First, immediately following the credits, the camera takes us on a journey to a 1943 Chicago Saloon where the pianist, “Sunny Ray,” plays background jazz for the audience as they await a dance performance by a host of young women called the “Steppers.” Right as the Steppers begin to perform, Sunny Ray’s fingers start to move faster and faster across the keys until eventually glasses in the audience shatter from the notes, fires break out, furniture and random human bodies are blown in different directions as if the piano itself were a great wind, and the piano begins to smoke until Sunny Ray thrusts it away from himself putting an end to the whole ordeal. What was an upscale saloon is now left in shambles by the sheer force of Sun Ra’s music.

Next, somewhere in outer space, Sun Ra’s Arkestra starts playing music. The scene begins with the whole band in a room as the beating of an African drum starts. The tune progresses in complexity as new instruments are added with each bar. Finally, when Sun Ra’s piano enters and the horns hit their highest pitch, the camera pans out to a yellow spaceship headed toward Earth. As the music continues to play, Sun Ra enters another room filled with shiny panels, mirrors, a television screen, and a control panel. From here it becomes clear that Sun Ra’s Arkestra is playing music inside the spaceship and that these sounds, or vibrations, are being used to fuel the ship’s journey toward Earth. Outside of the universe depicted in *Space in the Place* and concerts hosted by Sun Ra himself, technology of this sort does not exist in the Given World. And yet, Sun Ra insists throughout the film, in interviews, and during performances that it does. In the next section, I analyze how Sun Ra’s Space Chord functions and illuminate its ability to work on the other side of time.

Subject: Playing the Space Chord

Sun Ra's SF film, *Space is the Place*, provides an excellent opportunity to analyze how the Space Chord resonates theoretically with Michelle Wright's theorization of time in her text, *The Physics of Blackness*. To effectively recognize this connection, it is important to understand the Space Chord not as an isolated entity, but as part of a larger project facilitated by Sun Ra. John Coney is listed as the director of *Space is the Place*, but Sun Ra is certainly the auteur. Sun Ra not only stars in the film as himself, but he also participates in the screenwriting process and the final cut editing. Moreover, the film is essentially about Sun Ra and the life that he led. He famously insisted that he was born on Saturn and that his music had the ability to transport black people to other worlds. In the Given World outside of *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra's Arkestra performed Space Rituals in an effort to liberate black people from racial oppression in the 1960s and 1970s. These performances sometimes lasted as long as five hours but they always had the same objective—to get the listeners to move beyond their racial differences and systems of bigotry on Earth and create new realities (presumably absent of racial representations). In an interview during a BBC documentary Szwed describes the Space Ritual:

It would boil into a sort of chaos. What would be brought out of it is what he would call a space chord. A chord, which we call a cluster now, technically speaking. But it would hopefully have every musician playing a different note at once and then it would resolve itself into something else.³⁰³

Szwed goes on to describe how the ritual always starts with something small like a traditional African drum and then gets more complicated and space-like as the ritual

³⁰³ Don Letts, dir., *Sun Ra, Brother From Another Planet* (London: BBC, 2005).

develops and adds more modern instruments. I argue that Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* is a Space Ritual performed through the medium of film. It is his effort at reaching a wider audience of people with his message of intergalactic freedom. According to Szwed, *Space is the Place* was only released in two theaters, one each in San Francisco and New York. After just two showings, it was dropped. Thus, even though Sun Ra's film had a theatrical release, it is not likely that many people even had the chance to see the film in 1974. Nevertheless, over the years since its opening, the film has become somewhat of a cult classic, clips and stills of which are shown regularly at AF conferences and gatherings around the country.

There is one scene in the film where the Space Ritual is most apparent. Toward the end of the film, Sun Ra and the Arkestra perform a concert where he and June Tyson, the Arkestra's lead dancer and vocalist, recite a call and response to each other:

We are another order of being
We bring to you the mathematics of an Alter-Destiny

Look up! See the greater universe
Everything is in place, every star, every planet
Everything is in place but you planet Earth!
Everything is in place except you planet Earth!

You are just like you always were, in your improper place
Living your improper lives and dying your improper deaths

Change your time for the unknown factor
Time passes away, but the unknown is immeasurable and never passes
way
The unknown is eternal because you will never know what it is all about

Your wisdom will be when you say: "I do not know"
 Your ignorance will be your salvation³⁰⁴

This spoken word segment is significant because it explains how Sun Ra uses the Space Chord to promote a *black secret mysticism*. Sun Ra's mystic project is often most accessible through his poetry. In fact, in *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*, Paul Youngquist suggests that Sun Ra's music and poetry are interrelated: "Sun Ra's words do not script his music. Rather, they recapitulate it in another idiom. Words equate with music, and visa versa, in a manner that communicates an abstract, ultimately spiritual wisdom."³⁰⁵ In the introduction to *The Immeasurable Equation*, a collection of Sun Ra's poetry, James L. Wolf echoes this sentiment as well: "I know of no other poet who uses fewer concrete nouns than does Sun Ra ... Wisdom, dimensions, endlessness, potentials, blackness, source, word, world, etc. etc. Abstractions."³⁰⁶

Sun Ra's references to the immeasurable, the unknown, and the endless are directly related to his interest in myth as a medium through which to access new worlds, new destinies, and new realities. For Sun Ra, the current reality is not acceptable because of the manner in which it treats black people unequally. One characteristic of reality that Sun Ra recognizes is that it is forged in history, and as stated earlier, Sun Ra is skeptical of history. Just as David Walker argued in *The Appeal*, it is very easy for history to be misread as leaving black people out of it, especially when the subject matter is the ancient world. Sun Ra

³⁰⁴ Coney, *Space Is the Place*.

³⁰⁵ Paul Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 73.

³⁰⁶ James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken, eds., *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose* (Norderstedt, Germany: Waitawhile, 2005), 4.

recognizes that history informs the present. This is dangerous in his mind, as well as Walker's, because they realize that history is told by those in power—namely, white people. Thus, Sun Ra also argues in the beginning of the film that to free black people from planet Earth, “equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended, we'll work on the other side of time.”³⁰⁷

For Sun Ra, the other side of time is myth. He prefers to view the Given World through the prism of myth precisely because myth operates outside the confines of a verifiable reality:

The Kingdom of not.....
 A realm of myth. [...]
 It is not but yet is ... [...]
 Thus it is not of the past
 And hence is not of the passed
 Consider the hidden presence [...]
 Of the kingdom of not.....³⁰⁸

Youngquist suggests that Sun Ra deems the realm of myth to the land of not: “It does not exist and never has. To that extent, it offers a solution to the problem of history, whose pastness scripts a dead present. In a functional sense, however, myth does exist.”³⁰⁹ Youngquist goes on to argue that myth exists in the sense that it influences real life such as the case with ancient Greece or the Egyptians. I argue that Youngquist's reading of Sun Ra in relation to myth misses the mark. Sun Ra does not advocate the myth over reality for its

³⁰⁷ Coney, *Space Is the Place*.

³⁰⁸ Sun Ra, quoted in Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 190.

³⁰⁹ Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 190.

functionality. If this were the case, the Given World would still occupy a space of prevalence—myth is only useful to the extent that it affects reality.

In contrast, I argue that Sun Ra interprets myth as a hidden, forgotten, or even future reality. The “Kingdom of not” does not reference the Given World, it is the other side of life’s immeasurable equation—Infinity. If reality is marked by chronological time, then myth is characterized by infinity. Thus, Sun Ra develops the Space Chord with the express purpose of affecting earthly vibrations such that people become awakened to the power of myth to *actually* export the human experience of reality beyond the confines of the real. Walker attempts a similar project with *The Appeal* through the use of a different form of technology. But the objective was analogous—to encourage black people to see themselves as part of another story, one authored by black people, not white people. In his poetry and his music alike, Sun Ra suggests that he already lives in this new myth of tomorrow. He plays his music in the hopes that others will join him:

In some far off place
 Many light places in Outer-Space
 I’ll wait for you.
 Where human feet have never trod
 Where human eyes have never seen
 I’ll build a world of otherness ...
 Other-abstract-natural design
 And wait for you ...³¹⁰

Theorizing Sun Ra’s Space-Time

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have described Sun Ra’s music, his influences, and his film, *Space is the Place*, by loosely adhering to Delany’s SF Reading

³¹⁰ Wolf, *Sun Ra*, 392.

Protocols. In this section, rather than continue to describe Sun Ra's musical influence, our attention is focused specifically on his development of the Space Chord as a diegetic prototype and how it might be appropriated by Afrofuturists. I am especially interested in analyzing how it functions theoretically to subvert conventional notions of time and space. To that end, this section engages a discourse about approaches to black liberation and their relationship to these themes as viewed through the lens of Michelle Wright's *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*.

I argue that Sun Ra's Space Chord psychically removes listeners from a linear timeframe into a pocket outside of time where alternative dreams of the future can be realized and, in the case of Sun Ra, old myths can be reinterpreted such that black people are at the center. Michelle Wright discusses this creative process in an innovative way. Her thesis in *The Physics of Blackness* is that defining blackness continues to create issues in society because our conception of what black is and is not adheres to a linear progress model of history.³¹¹ That is to say, all of black history in Western society, not just black insurgency, is framed as having started with the Middle Passage, followed by a linear progression toward freedom thereafter. She states that this historical frame, "is a commanding one: it negotiates the complexity of the origins of Blackness in the West by stressing the process of being ripped from one existence and brutally thrust into another."³¹²

³¹¹ Throughout this section I refer to a linear progress model of history. This term is a reinterpretation of a term coined by Doug McAdam—The Political Process Model—in his text, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. As discussed in Chapter 2, his text suggests that the path toward successful black insurgency might be modeled over time from its start to its decline. In short, the model adheres to a linear progression of time based on a conventional interpretation of chronological history.

³¹² Michelle Wright, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 14.

Thus, she argues that black history is documented by both black people and white people alike as a series of events toward progress away from America's original sin of slavery—The Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States. Extrapolating from this argument, Wright implies that black cultural productions, such as AF, are gauged based on how they fit into this historical narrative as well. Wright identifies several problems with this approach to black history.

First, defining blackness in this way only refers to blackness in relationship to the perceived active agent in linear history—whiteness. While white people actively move history along its course, black people are reactionary, serving only as responders to actions taken by whites that negatively affect their lives. Second, this vertical approach is heteronormative in the sense that the achievements of black people throughout history are told primarily through the experiences of heterosexual black men. Third, people with black skin existed prior to the Middle Passage. Therefore, descendants of Africans who were never enslaved have a unique identity that does not directly involve the various moments that hold the linear progress model together. Fourth, any person or event that does not meet this vertical, white, heteronormative, American-centric trajectory is relegated to operating outside of history. According to Wright, this means that tireless contributions to black history by black women and the LGBTQ community are at best seen as alternative histories, but ultimately rarely included in any unifying definition of blackness.

Wright names this way in which the history of blackness is used a Middle Passage Epistemology. She argues that what we consider knowledgeable about blackness is measured by how well it fits into this linear progress model of black history. She also notes

that any attempt to define blackness outside the boundaries of this strictly Western framework is often met with apprehension by scholars because it threatens to rupture the foundation of the model. The argument against such disruption within the black community is that to embrace a broader definition of blackness might lead to a rejection of important black historical moments, and consequently to an ignorance of social concerns that truly do disproportionately affect black people. Wright quotes scholars Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel from the anthology, *Race and Foundations of Knowledge*: “By characterizing misrepresentations of blackness as ‘empty’ or ‘free-floating,’ Young and Braziel reveal a central worry associated with the notion of Blackness that isn’t ‘grounded,’ or given weight, specifically, through its ‘historical category.’”³¹³

To address these criticisms but also allow for a more inclusive definition of blackness, Wright offers a concept she terms Epiphenomenal Time. Based in part on findings in her own research in the field of Physics, Wright argues that blackness should not be defined in terms of linear historical progress where we define *what* blackness is. Rather, we should interrogate blackness according to *when* it is and in accordance with whether or not the person experiencing life’s moments imagines their own performance of self as black. When addressing the question, “What is blackness?” Wright suggests that “pursuing the question requires focusing on the phenomenology of Blackness—that is, when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal.”³¹⁴

³¹³ Ibid., 6.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

Wright argues that blackness has meant different things during different periods throughout history. Thus, it is not adequate to define blackness in totality based on our own present historical moment. Additionally, as a person occupies moments throughout history, blackness is defined by how an individual interprets their own subjectivity. She states: “Blackness, then, is largely a matter of perception or ... made up of moments of performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black.”³¹⁵ Thus, blackness for Wright becomes an imaginative process, largely dependent upon an individual’s vision of themselves as a performer in time and space.

Anticipating criticism from scholars that her framing of blackness supports the idea that historical and social inequalities faced by black people are not real, Wright proposes that Epiphenomenal Time does not deny linear history nor does it suggest that blackness is forged solely in the eye of the beholder.³¹⁶ As it pertains to history, Wright argues that unlike linear time, which assumes that one historical moment necessarily causes another, Epiphenomenal Time:

denotes the current moment, a moment that is not directly borne out of another...[It] does not preclude any and all causality: only *direct*, or *linear*, causality. In other words, the current moment, or the ‘now’, can certainly correlate with other moments, but one cannot argue that it is always already the effect of a specific previous moment.³¹⁷

Wright insists that the material implications of blackness are indeed very real. Linear history exists and black people are subject to racism and other forms of inequality.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

To deny this is “a strategic if entirely mendacious way to sanction anti-blackness.”³¹⁸ However, by allowing oneself to engage blackness in Epiphenomenal Time as opposed to *solely* in linear time, blackness is suddenly open to vast new possibilities that quite literally expand beyond traditional notions of time and space. If Blackness, and in this case aspects of black culture such as AF, one defined using only the linear progress model, according to Wright, anyone or anything that claims blackness and is not engaged in a particular form of black liberation is removed not just from history, but from our own interpretations of the present and the future.

When Sun Ra plays the Space Chord, he reclaims his own autonomy from the confines of a linear progress model and allows for black people to consider new worlds where the Middle Passage Epistemology does not reign supreme. In these worlds, black people author their own stories by forging identities no longer wed to notions such as heteronormativity or even black liberation. Sun Ra insists through his music, poetry, and venture into film that blackness does not fit into a fixed model. Instead, blackness is performative, improvisational, and imaginative. Adhering to the dictates of history as told through white narrators restricts black possibilities in the present and the future.

This is why David Walker wrote *The Appeal*—he wanted black people to create new identities not marked by slavery, but by freedom of thought. Sun Ra played the Space Chord to awaken black bodies to a hidden frequency in the universe where salvation is right around the corner. In this space, it is necessary that black people become highly creative because their identities, though certainly informed by the Middle Passage Epistemology,

³¹⁸ Ibid.

are not constrained by it. As argued so eloquently by Wright, it is beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology where some of the most innovative approaches to blackness, such as those offered by David Walker and Sun Ra, occur. In the next chapter, I discuss how Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra have influenced a new generation of AF artists to design original worlds and innovative technologies. This cohort of Afrofuturists produce work in numerous genres and mediums. Some of the most groundbreaking artwork can be found in the pages of graphic novels authored by a two-person team working under the pen name Black Kirby.

Wielding Afrofuturistic Chronotopes:

The *Black Kirby* Hero Complex

In this study, I have examined the work of Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Sun Ra by engaging in close readings of their diegetic prototypes and how they address concerns in the Given World. For this concluding chapter, I make a conceptual shift and argue that the technologies created by the aforementioned artists are not only frequently referenced texts in AF. In addition, their work provides the foundation for a working theory of AF. I propose an analytical framework for Afrofuturistic discourse that is grounded in the reading of creative works by Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra not as solely diegetic prototypes, but as *Afrofuturistic chronotopes*. This argument is based on the frequency with which these artists are discussed together in Afrofuturistic discourse and the often-subtle references to their creations in Afrofuturistic productions.

As I noted in the introduction, the work of Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra has yet to be brought into conversation to develop a theoretical framework that constitutes what AF is. This chapter proposes an interplay between the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord* that demonstrates a clear philosophical disposition aligned with Samuel R. Delany's Trivalent Discourse as described in chapter 1, particularly around the notion of mysticism. Delany wrote about how SF narratives use the future as a convention to create critical distortions of the present. When done well, Delany argues that SF offers a potential mystic moment for the reader. In similar fashion, I argue that practitioners of AF utilize designed *chronotopes* to reveal hidden worlds that parallel Michelle Wright's Epiphenomenal Time.

To illustrate this argument, I review John Jennings and Stacey Robinson's use of these *chronotopes* in their 2012 fine art exhibition, *Black Kirby*. After analyzing *Black Kirby*, I provide insight into how such appropriation is the foundation of contemporary Afrofuturism.

AF Reading Protocols: Delany's Trivalent Discourse Revisited

Charles R. Saunders, author of the *Imaro* series of novels, wrote an essay titled "Why Blacks Should Read (And Write) More Science Fiction," in which he argues that it is important for black people to engage in the genre because it is the "mythology of our technological culture."³¹⁹ He suggests that the stories we tell each other in different forms of media work to construct the very foundations of how we see and interpret ourselves in the real world. He continues that if black people refuse to participate in this contemporary mythmaking, other people will do it in their place. Saunders further illustrates this point by providing an example of how dangerous it is to leave the rendering of Africa in SF to white authors like Mike Resnick, editor of the 1993 anthology *Future Earths: Under African Skies*.

In this anthology Resnick comments on how human rights issues in Africa such as slavery in the Sudan, female circumcision, and dictatorial rulers are great "story material."³²⁰ He goes on to state that Africa "provides thoroughly documented examples of some of the most fascinating people and societies any writer, searching for the new and the different

³¹⁹ Charles Saunders, "Why Blacks Should Read (And Write) More Science Fiction," in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 404.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 402.

and the alien, could hope to find.”³²¹ Saunders argues that Resnick’s comments about Africa represent a cultural problem that black people must address. He contends that if black people do not create and critique these new myths, they will not only have to deal with stereotypes in their fiction but they may also be rendered aliens in real life. Therefore, it is imperative that black people, “contribute to this overall mythology ... and provide alternatives to the stereotypes that continue to plague us within that mythology.”³²²

With a theoretical nod to Saunders’s edict, Delany’s *Modular Calculus* critiques the Given World through its keen interrogation of the model and the modeled. This inquiry creates fissures in the boundary between the Given World and the world of fiction. In doing so, the diegetic prototype allows us to envision our existence as a constructed narrative that we collectively generate each and every day. With this framing in mind, the difference between reality and fiction is nebulous and Delany’s stories operate less as fictions than as labs where he experiments with concepts and technologies freely. Delany’s diegetic prototype introduces a veritable *nowhere* within which the lack of certain social and physical conventions allows for possibilities not yet achieved in the Given World.

Where Delany’s *Modular Calculus* opens the door to *nowhere* and describes its terrain, Butler’s *Earthseed* exemplifies its potentiality. With Butler’s *Earthseed*, we witness more than the possibility of fresh ideas: the development and the mechanics of how these new concepts might actually work. Butler’s *Earthseed* represents a yet unrealized politics of epistemology in the Given World. This diegetic prototype reimagines a world where the

³²¹ Mike Resnick, quoted in *ibid.*

³²² Saunders, “More Science Fiction,” 404.

historically marginalized are not at a disadvantage in society because of their race and gender. Instead, in *nowhere*, where history has officially ended, we witness a black woman as the global interpreter and teacher of esoteric knowledge that will lead to the next stage of human evolution.

Finally, Sun Ra's *Space Chord* functions as the bridge between worlds. If the *Modular Calculus* pierces the boundary that separates worlds and *Earthseed* represents the potential knowledge available to us in *nowhere*, the *Space Chord* is our ticket back home to the Given World. As a transportation device, the *Space Chord* possesses the technology to move human beings to and from Delany's *nowhere*. In *Space Is the Place*, we witness Sun Ra employ the *Space Chord* to save black people from the confines of an oppressive environment. As diegetic prototypes, the objective of these technologies is to have an effect in the Given World, so Sun Ra uses the *Space Chord* to bring new concepts and technologies back from *nowhere*.

Returning to Delany's theory of a trivalent discourse present in SF narratives, we can now see how each of these diegetic prototypes represents one aspect of that discourse. Delany's *Modular Calculus* represents AF's outward facing dialogue between the Object—or in this case *nowhere*—and the Given World. Delany's diegetic prototype works to bring attention to both the differences and similarities between these two realities. Butler's *Earthseed* represents AF's inner dialogue of the Subject, or rather the content of what is discovered in *nowhere*. Unlike the *Modular Calculus*—a theory never fully realized in Delany's text—the development of *Earthseed* is a fully formed narrative experiment with plot, characters, and settings. Sun Ra's *Space Chord* represents the inward facing dialogue in which the Given World is in conversation with both the Subject and the Object. Enticed

by the possibilities present in *nowhere*, Sun Ra invents a technology capable of transporting people to and from these worlds.

Together, these three technologies harmonize to form the foundation of what we call Afrofuturism. In the first chapter, I discussed how Delany argues such a harmony is mystical in the sense that the boundary between real and surreal, fact and fiction, is momentarily blurred while reading SF. This moment, achieved through the distortion of the Given World gives rise to a whole new conscious experience where conventional notions of time and space no longer apply. As articulated by Wright in her text, *The Physics of Blackness*, epiphenomenal moments such as these do not replace history as we know it in the Western world. Rather, they insist that the constrictive chronological timeline inherited at birth is not the only model of history. AF recognizes that for marginalized groups to exist in their full humanity, fundamental shifts in how we interpret the world must occur. AF enables the design of technologies that transport people to this new epistemological perspective. The diegetic prototypes designed by Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra all work to achieve this in interrelated ways. In fact, their creations are so influential that they have achieved a new designation as *AF chronotopes*.

On Chronotopes

This interplay between *The Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord* might be presented as the conceptual framework for how AF operates as an aesthetic and philosophy. For example, in this section I analyze how *Black Kirby* treats the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord* as *chronotopes* to critique a white heteronormative future at the center of America's comic book industry. By rendering the work of Delany,

Butler, and Sun Ra *AF chronotopes*, co-creators John Jennings and Stacy Robinson systematically revise Jack Kirby's comic book series, *The Eternals*, and in the process, position blackness at the helm of the Marvel comic book universe.

Elaborating on this point, *chronotopes* are central to Paul Gilroy's classic text, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Often cited in scholarship on AF for its analysis of black authenticity and black music, Gilroy's text suggests that black people in the United States have neglected a substantial amount of their heritage and intellectual property by maintaining a far too insular concept of blackness.³²³ After investigating black cultural expressions in the form of literature, music, and the visual arts, Gilroy argues that since the coming of modernity, blackness has not been essentially nationalistic, but fundamentally diasporic.

In the *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy cites Martin Delany, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright as black intellectuals who embody his notion of the black Atlantic diaspora. Rather than simply identify similarities between these three men to demonstrate his point, Gilroy uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the *chronotope* to address the *meaning* of their similarities. Bakhtin's *chronotope* is a literary device used to establish generic divisions in the history of the Western novel.³²⁴ Often employed as a method to locate a text within a genre of literature, it is also used to trace motifs in aesthetic productions to address their relationship

³²³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

³²⁴ See Nele Bemong et al., eds., *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Gent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2010), 3.

to particular points in history. In the *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy identifies the ship as an important *chronotope* in black history:

Ships were the living means by which the points between the Atlantic world were joined. ... They need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade. ... Ships also refer to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialization and modernization.³²⁵

Gilroy notes how ships (and sailors) are present in the lives, artistic productions, and intellectual pursuits of all the major black intellectuals mentioned in his book. Gilroy discusses how, like the ship, black slaves and intellectuals alike traveled the world. In each location, there was an international exchange of cultural artifacts such as commerce, religion, and education. Once slavery began, black people were not only subject to these exchanges they were the actual entities being exchanged. This is significant because Gilroy believes that the *chronotope* of the ship is representative of a historical moment—the beginning of modernity—as embodied by black people themselves:

Getting on board [the ship] promises a means to reconceptualize the orthodox relationship between modernity and what passes for its prehistory. It provides a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of western civilization.³²⁶

I argue that Delany's *Modular Calculus*, Butler's *Earthseed*, and Sun Ra's *Space Chord* are *AF chronotopes*. As designed technologies, they resurface repeatedly throughout AF artistic productions and scholarly writings. It is often difficult to discern their presence. Returning to Gilroy's *chronotope* of the ship, Parliament's 1975 album *Mothership*

³²⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 17.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

Connection offers a prime example. Clinton's Mothership may differ significantly from the ships docking into the ports of Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1860), but as examples of a *chronotope* they share similar qualities following Gilroy's interpretation. In *Blake*, the ship represents freedom and access to the world for black people. In similar fashion, the Mothership travels through interstellar space to Earth to bring the funk back to the people.³²⁷ The Mothership too, then, represents a return home to a time and space when black people are free. As it pertains to Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra, all three of their *chronotopes* are usually present in AF narratives. This is critical because, as demonstrated in the earlier chapters, for the mystical moment to be achieved, the harmony of all three discourses must be in accord. To demonstrate how *AF chronotopes* function in *Black Kirby*, it is useful to review this comic book universe through the lens of AF Reading Protocols. Thus, in the following section, I engage *Black Kirby* and the artist that inspired the entire project, Jack Kirby.

Given World: The Jack Kirby Universe (Celestials)

Kirby is one of the most prolific artists in comic book history. His work is so vast that it has significantly influenced the world of Marvel Comics as well as the world of DC Comics. While many people are familiar with his most popular titles such as the *Fantastic Four* (1961–present) and *Black Panther* (1966–present), it is often less well known that

³²⁷ For George Clinton, the funk is a force so strong that it literally cures ailments and frees people from the confines of everyday conventions of life. This freedom is achieved when the funk is heard through the radio in a similar fashion to Sun Ra's *Space Chord*. See Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Quartet Books, 1998, pp. 54.

Kirby's comics expand far beyond American superheroes wearing capes to include a larger universe filled with SF imagery depicting images of God-like forces. Kirby's lesser known titles such as the *Eternals* (1976) and *New Gods* (1971–present) draw on Judeo-Christian influences and reframe hundreds of loosely connected titles, such as *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen* (1954–74), under one universe controlled by all-powerful God figures hailing from different galaxies.³²⁸ Lately, the Hollywood movie industry has benefited from record breaking movie sales attributed to Marvel Comics.³²⁹ Movies such as *Iron Man* (2008), *Captain America* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) are popular in part because of the continuity between them. Audiences can follow storylines from one movie to another. Yet the extent of the continuity expressed in these films is comparatively local in relation to the intergalactic extent of the universe explored by Jack Kirby as early as the 1970s.

For example, in 1976, Marvel released Kirby's *Eternals*. Over the course of a short-lived eleven-issue run, Kirby reframes Marvel's universe to include a race of technologically advanced aliens called the Celestials. Little is known about the origin of the Celestials except that they have been in existence since before humans populated Earth, and in fact, they are responsible for an evolution in the human species that produces two advanced races, the Deviants and the Eternals. The Celestials created these races such that they would protect Earth from the dangers of the universe. The Deviants—the Celestials' first attempt at

³²⁸ See Charles Hatfield's *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), in which he discusses Old Testament influences in Kirby's work.

³²⁹ Marvel films that are part of the *Avengers* storyline have all grossed hundreds of millions of dollars in theaters. See "Marvel Comics," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=marvelcomics.htm>.

directed human evolution—resulted in a race that was fundamentally violent and vengeful. The Deviants are an ugly species who are unable to reproduce uniform biological structures. Each generation brings into existence uniquely hideous specimens. Thousands of years ago, jealous of humans, the Deviants fought against them to rule the planet rather than work with them to protect the Earth. They succeeded in this effort until the return of the Celestials who waged combat against the Deviants, removing them from power and forcing them deep underground never to be heard from again.

The Celestials' second engagement with human evolution led to the Eternals. The Eternals are a highly-advanced society of beautiful individuals, all of whom are white. They live in the clouds, possess telepathic abilities, enjoy art and culture, and can fly. They live separately from human beings and have never interacted with them, save the great battle thousands of years ago when the Celestials returned to Earth to defeat the Deviants. The Eternals fought on the side of the Celestials and were ultimately allowed to continue to flourish. Although separated from humans, they continue to look over them as they await the inevitable return of the Celestials.

Kirby's *Eternals #1* tells the story of these races as the Celestials reappear from the depths of outer space and land on Earth at the site of an old Mayan ruin in the Amazon. When they land, Kirby depicts the Celestials as giant humanoid Robots whose full height reaches to the clouds. The Celestials, and one Celestial in particular, Arishem, have returned to Earth to pass judgment on the planet and its inhabitants. Should they be pleased with their creations, Earth will be allowed to continue. Should they not, the issue implies that Arishem will destroy the Earth and start the Celestial genetic project over again. Kirby's creation bears many similarities to Judeo-Christian creation myths, particularly as it relates

to the passing of judgment by God. In *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2011), author Charles Hatfield suggests that “Arishem is another take on that sort of Old Testament God, but refigured as a machine-like functionary, inorganic, almost robotic: the destruction principle couched in anthropocentric form, yet imbued with no character per se.”³³⁰

These contemporary myths created by Jack Kirby, though enjoyable and ultimately visionary in John Jennings and Stacey Robinson’s estimation, are overwhelmingly white. All of Kirby’s main characters in *The Eternals* are white, and the most powerful beings save the Celestials themselves (whose race we cannot see under their robotic armor) are the Eternals who are framed as the height of human genetics. In addition, their genetic disposition is ordained by God. *Black Kirby* asks the question: where does Jack Kirby’s contemporary mythology leave black people? According to Charles Saunders, these new myths frame our collective future. So where will black people be in the centuries to come?

Object: The Black Kirby Universe

Black Kirby is a Black comic book universe—a collection of black comic book characters and their stories—envisioned and executed by visual artists John Jennings and Stacey Robinson, who are also black. There have been other acclaimed black comic book universes before, namely Milestone Media’s *Dakotaverse* (1993–97) and Big City Entertainment’s *Big City* (1990–present). But *Black Kirby* is different than these projects in profound ways. Milestone is without question the most commercially successful effort by

³³⁰ Hatfield, *Hand of Fire*, 168.

black authors to create a universe filled with black characters. Yet Milestone is not a separate black universe so much as a more diverse segment of the larger DC universe which features predominantly white characters created by white authors. In 1993, several black artists and writers employed by DC Comics—principally Dwayne McDuffie, Michael Davis, Denys Cowan, and Derek T. Dingle—formed an independent comic book publishing company affiliated with the DC Comics universe that focused primarily on the development of characters with diverse backgrounds pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality.

According to Jeffery A. Brown in *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, the success of this endeavor was a surprise to many DC Comics fans: “None of these comic book fans ... expected much from the fledgling company. ... They had all seen some of the embarrassing black superheroes that the mainstream industry had created in the past.”³³¹ Brown explains how on the independent market, fans had become tired of “reading the uneven and politically motivated black books that were currently on the market.”³³² Milestone, with its fully developed characterizations, was a pleasant surprise for many because the stories that tied the universe together were unlike others already on the market. In fact, *Black Panther* author from 2005–08, Reginald Hudlin recounts that “Milestone Media was the first company to create a superhero universe full of Black, Latino, Asian, and white superheroes—both gay and straight.”³³³ Nevertheless, as Brown describes in his text,

³³¹ Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 16.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ “DC Entertainment Announces the Return of the Milestone Universe,” *DCcomics.com*, July 2015, <http://www.dccomics.com/blog/2015/07/11/dc-entertainment-announces-the-return-of-the-milestone-universe-with-the-creation-of>.

sales started to decline starting in 1995 and several characters' books were cancelled.³³⁴ In 1997, the company was discontinued.

In 1990, three brothers, Dawud Anyabwile, Guy Sims, and Jason Sims published the first issue of *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline*. Considered by many comic book historians to be the first black-authored comic book superhero to reach the mainstream, *Brotherman* is a predecessor to the 1990s black comic book boom ushered in by Dwayne McDuffie and Milestone Media. Though certainly a less lucrative route, Anyabwile and his brothers chose to publish their comic book under their own independent publisher, Big City Entertainment. This decision allowed them to take certain liberties with *Brotherman's* narrative that other comic book creators did not have at the time.

Where issues of racial disparity are staples of the early black characters like Marvel's Luke Cage or DC's Black Lightning, race never enters the storyline of *Brotherman*. The story's main character Antonio Valor works as a public defender downtown during the day, but fights crime donning a sweater mask and jogging suit at night. After watching *Brotherman* kick butt through the first few issues, a keen reader will notice that there are no white people in Big City at all. In fact, even though the city has poor people, rich people, and a myriad of different personalities, Big City features no ethnic diversity. Each character from the mayor to the homeless bum to the store shop owner to the seductive thief has the same skin tone.³³⁵ The characters drawn by Anyabwile all look like black folk. In a city where

³³⁴ Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 15.

³³⁵ Well, as much as can be registered on a black and white comic book page.

there are no references to race whatsoever, the reader is left to navigate a universe where dark-skinned people occupy every position.

Black Kirby differs from the universes created by Milestone Media and Big City Entertainment in the sense that it is not a publishing company. Instead, it is a persona or an avatar ascribed to the artistic duo, John Jennings and Stacey Robinson with overt references to Jack Kirby and AF. Originally a fine arts exhibition housed at the University of Buffalo (SUNY) in 2012, the *Black Kirby* catalog features comic book covers that are readily recognizable to comic book enthusiasts but for one major difference—all of the characters are black. What differentiates the *Black Kirby* universe from the Dakotaverse or Big City is that the entire exhibition is a pointed revision of the Jack Kirby-inspired universe that heavily influenced Marvel Comics and DC Comics alike. Jennings and Robinson take famous comic book covers and remix them, often sampling Jack Kirby's imagery, such that they feature black main characters. In most cases, they even change the titles themselves. For example, Kirby's famous cover for *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962) is renamed *The Unkillible Black Buck* in the *Black Kirby* catalog. While Jennings and Robinson remix countless titles, they also create new images to help animate the universe. Sometimes, rather than revising an old comic book cover, they will focus specifically on a character like the Thing from the *Fantastic Four*, but give him an Afro and a hair pick as he states, "It's a black thing... you just wouldn't understand."³³⁶

³³⁶ John Jennings and Stacey Robinson, *Black Kirby: In Search of the MotherBoxx Connection Art Exhibition Catalog* (CreateSpace, 2013).

Kid Code: Channel Zero #1

Although the Black Kirby universe consists of primarily comic book covers, the creators produced two full length comic books as well—*Kid Code: Channel Zero* and *Spooky World*. In these texts, the creators expand the universe beyond simply making Jack Kirby’s most celebrated characters black. Rather, in remixing Kirby’s work, they use his template as inspiration to transform the world’s most popular comic book universe utterly. *Kid Code: Channel Zero #1* is the first and only narrative comic produced by *Black Kirby*. Unlike their fine art exhibitions and *Spooky World*, an abstract comic book, this comic also features Tan Lee, the title’s writer and letterer. Tan Lee, an obvious reference to Stan Lee,³³⁷ is actually Damian Duffy, a frequent collaborator of John Jennings on other comic book projects, including *The Hole: Consumer Culture V. 1* (2008) and the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (2017). In addition to the gallery shows, this comic is significant because it expands the *Black Kirby* universe, illuminates the rules by which the universe operates, and provides clear connections to Jack Kirby’s work.

Kid Code takes place in the aftermath of a great war between the God MC and The Power. The God MC is the creator of the universe and The Power is one of his or her fallen angels who betrays The God MC, throwing the universe out of balance and starting an epic war. The God MC literally fights The Power to save the universe.³³⁸ In this first issue of *Kid Code*, the reader is not introduced to a plethora of characters; however, the history of how this battle between The God MC and The Power got started is explained in great detail. The

³³⁷ Co-founder of Marvel Comics.

³³⁸ See Public Enemy, “Fight the Power,” *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam Recordings, 1990).

comic begins with a preface that reads: “In the Beginning was the word, and the word was with the God MC, and the word was the God MC, and that word was Yo!”³³⁹ The preface continues to explain how the God MC created the uni-verse using these words in the form of Ultimate Lyrics that were then compressed into Cosmic LPs. These Cosmic LPs function as the foundational source of energy for all living things, including human beings who are but hosts of the Dope Rhymes (souls) held within these Cosmic LPs. The preface continues, “But like all great MCs, God had a hater,” The Power, whose malevolence poisoned the Ultimate Lyrics.³⁴⁰ This forced the God MC to shatter his infected Cosmic LPs and hide them throughout space and time to save the rest of his holy record collection from infection.

Still, The Power did not give up. He now searches the mutli-verse in the fifth dimension, beyond linear space-time, for the shards of these shattered records so that he can cut them into the God MC’s uni-verse and once again create his evil remix. Hidden within unknown pockets of space-time, The Power broadcasts his evil remix from Channel Zero using the recovered shards. One of God MC’s lieutenants, Father Time, leads a uni-verse-wide search party for the location of Channel Zero in his efforts to shut The Power down. The name of this elite search party is The Knights of Infinite Digging (K.I.D). Kid Code, the comic’s protagonist, is the K.I.D.’s star officer, although sometimes he freestyles a bit too much for Father Time’s liking. This first issue follows Kid Code as a he searches for hidden shards of the Cosmic LPs because The Power is never far behind and every shard Kid finds leads him closer to Chanel Zero’s signal.

³³⁹ Damian Duffy, *Kid Code: Channel Zero #1* (Greenbelt, MD: Rosarium Publishing, 2014), 1.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Subject: The Quantum Space-time Quilt, The World Tree, The Needle Drop

John Jennings and Stacey Robinson use Jack Kirby’s universe as a laboratory where they experiment with different themes, characters, and technologies to remix Kirby’s entire mythos such that black people are at the center. However, their project seeks to do more than simply make black versions of Jack Kirby characters. In the *Black Kirby Catalog*, we get an inside look at their blueprints of diegetic prototypes used to remix Jack Kirby’s universe—a series of images titled “Last Angels of History (Impossible Machines to Save the World from Itself).”³⁴¹ These images are numbered and reveal renderings of technology that are so massive in their construction, so complex in their circuitry, that interpreting them in any meaningful way seems impossible. And yet, in their numerous color schemes, shapes, and sizes, they are drawn on blueprint grids as if to imply that they are indeed possible, if not readily understandable to the naked eye.

In *Hand of Fire*, Charles Hatfield writes at length about Jack Kirby’s rendering of technology in his work. He argues that Kirby was not only interested in SF but also in the sense of awe that accompanies technology in the real world. Hatfield writes that Kirby’s designs constitute a Technological Sublime because he uses “high-tech motifs to represent vast forces that not only are ineffable and awful (in the original sense of the word) but also may result in shock, estrangement, or madness.”³⁴² For Kirby, technological advancement

³⁴¹ For a more in depth analysis of John Akomfrah’s film and its connection to Walter Benjamin’s work, see Clinton Fluker, “Akomfrah’s Angel of History,” *Liquid Blackness: Fluid Radicalisms*. 1, no. 4 (November 2014): 45–57.

³⁴² Hatfield, *Hand of Fire*, 146.

is both beautiful and frightening because the more advanced our technologies become, the more they detach themselves from basic human understanding.

Following this theme of the Technological Sublime, Jennings and Robinson wield *AF chronotopes* in their work to open up spaces for the development of new and innovative technologies. However, for *Black Kirby*, the Technological Sublime does not represent estrangement, but rather its opposite—intimacy. In the Given World, the marginalized are often estranged from themselves and their history due to oppression. Thus, for Jennings and Robinson, technology has the potential to enhance basic human understanding because their designs are but extensions of themselves. They allow their users to engage more intimately with the very history from which they have been estranged. Like the work of Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra, the technologies designed by *Black Kirby* represent a harmony that gives rise to an epiphenomenal moment where the comic book universe first imagined by Jack Kirby is transformed such that black people are central to the universe itself.

The World Tree

Kid Code interprets the entire universe and all of its inhabitants in terms of music. God is not just God, but the God MC, a reference to the Microphone Controller in Hip Hop culture. People are not just people; instead, they are physical hosts for the dope rhymes first spit by the God MC at the creation of the uni-verse. Moreover, all of the unique creations in the uni-verse— planets, stars, asteroids, and other living beings—together form the God MC's Cosmic LP record collection. Thus, according to *Black Kirby*, the uni-verse is a

collection of music played in harmony indefinitely. Likewise, the uni-verse was created as a rap, or rather, a never-ending freestyle that sustains existence itself.

In addition to framing the uni-verse in terms of music, the Black Kirby creators weave another metaphor into this creation story: “From the root sound spread the Tree of Life A.K.A. ... The World Tree—the center of the universe, growing outside of time. ... The tree’s fruit was the souls of the ancestors.”³⁴³ These souls are the music that comprise the God MC’s Cosmic LP record collection. As the God MC continues his or her freestyle, the record collection grows, forming a beautiful World Tree nourished by the dope rhymes. In this way, the uni-verse expands outward like a tree’s branches, with its roots comprising the center.

This notion of the World Tree connects to Butler’s *Earthseed* as a *chronotope*. Butler’s *Earthseed* is a religion led by her main character Olamina. The main tenet of this religion is that God is change. The *Parable* series takes the reader on a journey marked by this theme of change as it is related to human evolution. The only way for humans to survive in the *Parable* series is by accepting that the status quo is unsustainable. Humans must evolve physically, mentally, and spiritually. This means that humans must learn to accept new experiences and new feelings that do not fit what is considered normal or predictable. Olamina never says that she knows what the future will hold. All she advocates is that humans need to reach for the stars, specifically because in the expanse of space, new and unknown possibilities are accessible. Practicing *Earthseed* provides a path toward realizing these possibilities.

³⁴³ Duffy, *Channel Zero*, 1.

Likewise, the World Tree embodies the change articulated through *Earthseed*. As stated earlier, the God MC's lyrics are not prescribed—there are no set bars in his or her rhymes. Rather, as the God MC freestyles, he or she raps the uni-verse into existence through a rhyme scheme absent any pattern or schema. The God MC's rhymes cannot be predicted because they are unpredictable. They cannot be replicated in totality because they never end. In this way, the souls of all human beings are the result of an ever-changing, ever-evolving song that reaches new and unforeseen possibilities with every verse and through every branch of the World Tree.

In the *Parable* series, Olamina suggests that human beings are meant to evolve because as life changes, humans must change as well. A comparable lesson is learned from the World Tree. Human souls are depicted as fruit from its ever-growing branches. Thus, it stands to reason that in *Black Kirby*, the human spirit is always in musical flux. The only entity that holds this unruly tune together at all is the God MC: “In the Beginning was the word, and the word was with the God MC, and the word was the God MC, and that word was Yo!”³⁴⁴ In this quote, the *Black Kirby* creators suggest that as the uni-verse continues to expand and evolve, so too does the God MC because the God MC is the uni-verse. As in Butler's *Parable* series, God is not an all-knowing being at the center of the universe, but rather *change* itself.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

The Needle Drop

In chapter 4 of this study, I analyzed Sun Ra's theological interests and his film *Space is the Place*. In both instances, Sun Ra proposes that everything in the universe has a certain musical frequency or vibration. Sun Ra's invention of the *Space Chord* is designed to tap into that frequency. In *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra suggests that the music on planet Earth is out of harmony. Marked by violence and hatred, the music on Earth has led to stark inequality for black people all over the world. Moreover, this inequality has roots that stem as far back as ancient myths before the Bible. Therefore, by playing the *Space Chord*, Sun Ra taps into the vibrations of black people, on the other side of time, and transports them to another planet where they can live in harmony with the universe.

Rendering the *Space Chord* a *chronotope*, *Black Kirby* creates a diegetic prototype of its own to address a related issue. Where Sun Ra uses the *Space Chord* to remix ancient myths that he sees as disruptive toward present and future black harmony, *Black Kirby* invents a new technology called the Needle Drop to remix Jack Kirby's contemporary myth as presented in comic books such as the *Eternals*. Like Sun Ra, *Black Kirby* interprets the universe in terms of musical vibrations. In *Kid Code #1* it is no surprise that the technology presented mirrors musical technology. The Needle Drop, a clear reference to the needle on a record player, is the technology that Kid Code uses to travel through interdimensional space while he searches for the location of Channel Zero.

On an actual LP record player, the listener is able to place the needle anywhere they want on the record. This means that the needle can play the songs on a record in order or out of order. The listener can even start a song in the middle. Moreover, on most record players, the speed with which the record plays can also be adjusted. For these reasons, the

LP record player is a foundational technology to Hip Hop culture. It allows musicians to distort the original track using these functions unconventionally to manipulate a song's sound, tempo, and musical arrangement. In the context of *Kid Code*, the whole uni-verse is a collection of LP records. So when the Needle Drop is used in the narrative, Kid Code is experimenting with actual time.

Jennings and Robinson depict this experimentation using striking images that break down the conventional structure of a comic book page. When the Needle Drop is turned on by the time-technician Roxy Clockwise, the images in *Kid Code* represent this interdimensional travel by contorting his body and surroundings to the point that they are barely recognizable. The fine white lines that structure each scene on a comic book page, called the Gutter, are also distorted. This forces colors to bleed into each other, making the entire page look as if all familiar staples of reality no longer exist. When the Needle Drop hits, Jennings and Robinson depict a visual experience that references the audio effect of Sun Ra's *Space Chord*. Sun Ra states in *Space Is the Place* that "time has officially ended" in reference to how he plans to use technology to transport Black people through space.³⁴⁵ When he plays the *Space Chord*, individual notes and musical harmony become difficult to identify. The same is true in *Kid Code*. For Kid Code to travel through interdimensional space, linear time must end. To a reader accustomed to linear time, the imagery associated with the Needle Drop looks abstract, even surreal.

³⁴⁵ John Coney, dir., *Space Is the Place* (North American Star System, 1974).

The Quantum Space-Time Quilt

The location where interdimensional travel takes place in *Kid Code* is called The Incredible, A.K.A. The Quantum Space-Time Quilt. This name references two concepts that are very important to AF, black secret technology and the *AF chronotope* of the *Modular Calculus*. As it pertains to black secret technology, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* by Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard purports that enslaved Africans in the southern United States stitched secret messages into quilts in their efforts to aid those slaves seeking freedom through the underground railroad: “As a fabric griot the African American quilt is a communicator, conveying heritage as it once displayed a means for slaves to flee the plantation and journey to freedom.”³⁴⁶ The text then goes on to review the different forms of coded patterns that were stitched into quilts and their interpreted meanings. The stitching of secrets into fabric also recalls the way David Walker shipped his message of a slave uprising through the cargo holds of ships during the late nineteenth century as discussed in the previous chapter.

The Quantum Space-Time Quilt is like the aforementioned black secret technologies in that it too leads the way to freedom. In *Kid Code*, the Quantum Space-Time Quilt functions as a wormhole, or an interdimensional highway. This highway enables Kid Code to travel to and from the fifth dimension, a location outside of time. In our world, as humans, we experience a dimension marked by chronological time. In the world of *Black Kirby*, access to the fifth dimension enables the past, present, and future to be experienced

³⁴⁶ Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 22.

simultaneously. Given that humans only experience time linearly, it is impossible to practically experience time in this manner. Thus, *Black Kirby's* fifth dimension channels Delany's *nowhere* because it is not locatable. There is no way to identify a place that exists outside of time. In a fashion comparable to Robin D. G. Kelley's notion of the Third Eye and Delany's *Modular Calculus*, *Black Kirby* attempts to use the Quantum Space-Time Quilt to blur the lines between fiction and reality.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the narrative of a special issue of *Kid Code* titled, "Tracks to Freedom." In this comic book, Kid Code enters the dreams of Martin Luther King Jr. before his March on Washington in August of 1963. Kid Code physically transports him through the Quantum Space-Time Quilt into the fifth dimension such that he can enlist Dr. King in the race to overtake an interstellar train—The Haintrain—run by The Power and restore souls to the victims being held hostage. After Dr. King agrees to aid Kid Code in his efforts to defeat the Power using his Soul Power³⁴⁷ Kid Code's train overtakes the Haintrain and restores the lost souls to their bodies. Shortly after The Power has been defeated and the story comes to a close, Dr. King has a vision of a mountaintop:

As the soul energies' cosmic comet tails traced whorls of wonderment along the extradimensional event horizon, the tempestuous aether once more trembled and transformed into a vision. A vision drawn not from the depths of Dr. King's darkest fears for the future. But rather, from his formulation of the highest achievements of a human society built on foundations of freedom.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Kid Code explains that his own train's Cybernetic Battery is charged by Soul Power, a power that King apparently possesses in enormous amounts. Although never completely explained, it appears that Soul Power emanates from people with strong moral and ethical centers. As the antagonist, The Power charges his battery using an alternative source of energy marked by evil and avarice (See Duffy, Damian. *Kid Code: Tracks to Freedom #2* [Greenbelt, MD: Rosarium Publishing, 2015], 12).

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

This vision is significant because, in the framing of the comic book, such a vision can only be realized in the fifth dimension where the future timeline runs alongside the present and the past. By depicting King's vision of the mountaintop in this way, in *Kid Code*, Black Kirby credits King's famous 1963 speech at the March on Washington not to a dream he had about the future, but to an actual experience of his where he caught a glimpse of humanity's greatest potential as it is destined to transpire.

Masterfully weaving the *AF chronotope* of the *Modular Calculus*, Jennings and Robinson create their own version of Delany's *nowhere* in the fifth dimension. Like the *Modular Calculus*, the Quantum Space-Time Quilt is a diegetic prototype used to bridge the gap between the fictional uni-verse and Given World. In addition, it is a tool used to demonstrate how the world of the imaginary might be used to influence real world events. According to this special issue of *Kid Code*, Dr. King's speech was so inspiring to people who witnessed it because he was speaking from experience. Dr. King's dreams were animated by real world actors operating in a dimension where time has officially ended. In this space, the rules and regulations of our Given World no longer apply and otherwise unforeseeable solutions to problems arise. In the process, *Kid Code* challenges its readers to reflect upon their own imaginations and discover ways for their wildest dreams and potentialities to come true.

Conclusion

AF borrows themes from black artists engaged in SF—such as Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra—and it engages SF worlds as experimental spaces where diegetic prototypes are designed with the purpose of addressing real world concerns. This process connects to Carl

DiSalvo's theory of adversarial design in that designed objects in AF are not only innovative technological developments but thoughtful rhetorical arguments for change in the Given World. In addition, returning the Michio Kaku's three Classes of Impossibilities, AF operates on the fringe. The technologies presented in Afrofuturistic art are seemingly impossible. And yet, the artists choose to speculate on the impossible in search of new solutions to problems that remain unresolved.

I argue that a popular and sizable strain of Afrofuturist artists design worlds animated by the *chronotopes* of the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord*. As *AF chronotopes*, the appearance of these technologies in artistic productions signal that the world occupied by its characters and the tools used within the narrative operate within AF space-time. These diegetic prototypes produced by contemporary artists do not go by the same names as their predecessors, but they do often perform analogous functions.

In *Black Kirby*, Jennings and Robinson weave each one of these *AF chronotopes* into their narratives. The names of the diegetic prototypes may be different, but the Quantum Space-Time Quilt, the World Tree, and the Needle Drop are in conversation with the work designed by their predecessors Delany, Butler, and Sun Ra. This is also apparent because, beyond their technological functions within the narrative of *Kid Code* and the larger *Black Kirby* universe, race is central to all three. In fact, *Black Kirby* is Jennings and Robinson's literal take on what the Marvel comic book universe would look like if its most influential artist, Jack Kirby, had been black. As articulated throughout the previous chapters, each *AF chronotope* is also designed to address problems in the Given World pertaining to race.

Initially, the *Modular Calculus* may appear to have no relationship to race whatsoever. However, after engaging in a close reading using our AF Reading Protocols, it

becomes clear that race is deeply integrated into its narrative function. The *Modular Calculus* takes us through a series of appendices, short stories, novels, and pseudo-academic essays, all to subvert our well-established myths regarding the contemporary Western world. The *Modular Calculus* demonstrates that our knowledge, moral ethos, political systems, and religious iconography may not have come from ancient Greece or Rome, but rather from Nevèryon—a place called *nowhere* in which black people ruled the world and gave birth to our modern political and socio-economic systems, for better or for worse.

The *Parable* series can be read as an apocalyptic novel about the emergence of a religion called *Earthseed*. Yet when read through AF Reading Protocols, Butler's choice to make the world's new religious leader a black woman in the twenty-first century has profound racial implications that resonate with debates in black feminist thought. Through *Earthseed*, Butler makes a commentary that suggests a world animated by common-sense knowledge must undergo an apocalypse for significant change to occur regarding race, gender, and sexual inequality. Only then will our minds be open enough to accept the sweeping change ushered in by *Earthseed's* black feminist epistemology.

Finally, the *Space Chord* is more than an innovative piece of music theory or a night's musical entertainment. The AF Reading Protocols help us to see how the *Space Chord* is a tool used to liberate black minds from white oppression in the late-twentieth century. Race and the *Space Chord* are intertwined such that a person cannot even hear the note played without having their bodies moved by the secret codes embedded within it to affect our earthly vibrations. Sun Ra's tool is designed specifically to uproot conventional notions of history and social practice that assign white people positions of power. The *Space Chord*

works to undo this reality in favor of a new one where black people have more control over their lives.

Not every Afrofuturist story or piece of art encompasses all three of these *chronotopes*. Some may have two, others may include only one. Nevertheless, a keen observer will discover that these *chronotopes* are present in the overwhelming majority of Afrofuturist productions. For this reason, I argue that whether it is intentional or not, the diegetic prototypes used in contemporary AF discourse stem from the work of Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Sun Ra. All the major voices in AF discussed in the introduction such as Kodwo Eshun, Greg Tate, Alondra Nelson, and Reynaldo Anderson would agree that these three creators have been highly influential. They might assert that George Clinton, Ishmael Reed, or Lee Scratch Perry should be granted equal prominence in my analysis. Such a critique might even be right. It is difficult to judge who has been more or less influential to AF's development. Regardless, in appropriating Delany's SF Reading Protocols, this study breaks new ground in offering a working hermeneutic for AF.

My use of AF Reading Protocols in conjunction with the identification of *AF chronotopes* represents a unique theoretical approach to the discourse of AF. This model is flexible enough such that it can be developed to incorporate additional *AF chronotopes* in addition to the *Modular Calculus*, *Earthseed*, and the *Space Chord*. This means that other artists' work beyond those mentioned in this text could and, perhaps, should be noted as foundational to AF. Yet in recognizing the centrality of a given artist to AF's foundations AF Reading Protocols or a similar hermeneutic must be employed. In providing AF scholarship with a rich and functional hermeneutical grounding, this study helps AF avoid

becoming a fleeting neologism that references black SF artists by theorizing in a new way how such artists' work is connected.

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