

IMAGINING GLOBAL FEMALE FUTURES IN BLACK SPECULATIVE AND SCIENCE  
FICTION

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this study stems from one primary question: how are black women's futures currently being imagined in works of cultural production? In this dissertation, I make the case that speculative and science fiction is currently trending as a medium through which to radically reimagine black women's subjectivity around the world. Moreover, the futures conceptualized in these films and texts provide a refreshing perspective on how black women are theorizing about their subjectivities. Their imaginings also challenge us to reconsider what theorizing looks like, and reflect on widening the scope of black women's discourses of difference.

In the readings of my focal works, I trace three main tensions present in transcontinental works typically characterized as black speculative and science fiction. The first is the impact of ecological abuse on black women's lives. The second tension involves the transgression of national boundaries (i.e. immigration, diaspora, displaced populations). The third and final tension includes exploitative gender relations within the postcolonial African context (i.e. postcolonial power structures, women's role in framing nationalist discourse). Within the context of my dissertation chapters, each of these three tensions is addressed through archetypal imagery. Through my reading of figures like the zombie, cyborg, vampire, superhuman, and a figure I call the anthropomorphoid, I demonstrate how these texts and films explore black women's subjectivity. Ultimately, I conclude that these archetypes position black women as agents of change and producers of knowledge who not only survive but are instrumental to the construction of a global future.

## DEDICATION

To my beautiful and spunky *chouchou*, Inés Elodie.

May the world you grow up in help you blossom into a woman who embraces her unique cultural heritage and finds empowerment in her femininity.

*Les étoiles sont là pour toi, ma puce.*

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING WOMEN'S FUTURES IN BLACK SPECULATIVE AND SCIENCE FICTION

Recently, speculative and science fiction imagery has become ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture. One need only look at the surging popularity of shows and films such as the *Blade* franchise (1998, 2002, 2004), the *Underworld* franchise (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2016), *The Walking Dead* series (2010-2018), the *Fear the Walking Dead* series (2015 to the present), and the *Westworld* series (2016 to the present), not to mention films and stand-alone series based on D.C. and Marvel comic book characters (i.e. Batman, Wonder Woman, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, The Justice League, The Avengers, etc.). Today's use of speculative imagery is broad and expansive in terms of the archetypes used, and typically relates to relevant aspirations and anxieties present in the public imaginary. As the emergence of social media, the forces of globalization, and various economic crashes weigh on the minds of those who have lived through the last decade, speculative imagery is presently trending as a mode through which to explore the consequences of our collective actions and propose potential remedies for the future.

Topics found in mainstream discourse are often reflected in contemporary speculative and science fiction texts, with intersections between race and gender figuring prominently. For instance, Diana Adesola Mafe's newly-released book, *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals in Speculative Film and TV* (2018), highlights the significance of black women featured in science and speculative fiction films and television series. Beginning with Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) in the American classic *Star Trek* television series (1966-1969), Mafe traces representations of black women throughout speculative and science

fiction filmic history. While many representations found in late twentieth-century speculative films tend to perpetuate what Mafe refers to as the “reinforcement of white male authority at the expense of Otherness and a predictable eroticization of black womanhood,” she argues for the potential of the genre to “show viewers something new” (2). Mafe also asserts that speculative fiction “implies limitless potential where raced and gendered imaginaries are concerned” primarily because it has and continues to be “a remarkable site of possibility when it comes to interrogating and reinventing social constructs such as race, gender, and class” (3).

Dominating the global box office with a record one billion in sales in just twenty-six days, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018) illustrates Mafe’s comments on reinventing race and gender using speculative and science fiction (Rubin 2018). The first film in the Marvel cinematic universe with a predominantly black cast, *Black Panther* uses speculative imagery as a vehicle through which to imagine ‘black power’ in a uniquely Pan-African context. As a Hollywood-funded film created in America but released to a global box office, with a narrative that privileges the role of Africans as integral players in the world’s geo-political sphere, *Black Panther* can be read as both a product of and response to globalization and its impact on black populations around the world.

*Black Panther*’s depiction of a technologically progressive Afro-future is both refreshing and timely. The film’s rejection of negative stereotyping concerning Africa, representation of egalitarian gender roles, and reimagining of diasporic identity call attention to how speculative fiction can be used as a tool of socio-political change. *Black Panther* also provides an avenue through which to re-examine historical events through an African lens to more fully understand the ways in which black experience is constructed across the globe. One way in which the film counteracts negative stereotyping of African countries is through the techno-progressive fictional

country of Wakanda. This country features as both a source of pride for *Black Panther*'s African characters and a vehicle of critique through which diasporic identity can be re-worked. In short, the time for conceptualizing black spaces as 'hearts of darkness' has passed – the time of Wakanda is now.

Positioned within what is currently categorized as black speculative thought, *Black Panther*'s political futurism foregrounds Pan-African identity as a key aspect of black community building. The film and its reception call attention to how speculative and science fiction themes are currently being used to explore black survival in the future. In the age of continued racial violence and institutional racism, the purported 'failure' of many postcolonial African nation-states, neocolonial control of Caribbean *départements d'outre mer*, and the #blacklivesmatter movement, black futurist works of cultural production are as much about claiming the present as they are about imagining the future. While loss and alienation have historically foregrounded conversations on diaspora and the relationship between Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S. within Western discourse, conversations happening within the black speculative movement address the double sidedness of globalization and its relationship to diasporic black experience. On one hand, globalization has been cited by many as the direct result of modern slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. However, it is also difficult to deny the positive forms of transnational black communities and solidarities that have been formed as a direct result of global transcultural exchange, particularly via digitized data sharing, social media platforms, and cyberculture.

Black women's voices have risen to the forefront of conversations on black futurity as well. Black women's lived experiences in an increasingly globalized world feature heavily in popular speculative and science fiction works. One of the primary ways in which *Black Panther*

has made waves in popular consciousness is through its depiction of strong female roles within the fictional narrative. Indeed, Wakanda's king, T'Challa, is protected and advised by a female general named Okoye, who has an equal say in political discussions, makes crucial decisions regarding the fate of her country, and oversees the elite force of all-female warriors known as the Dora Milaje. With their shaved heads, physically powerful physiques, and adept use of weaponry, the Dora Milaje's presence in the film reinforces a uniquely black female-focused agenda by positioning women as protectors of Wakanda. Likewise, Shuri, T'Challa's precocious and brilliant teenage sister, heads Wakanda's technological research and development sector. In her role, Shuri provides key weapons and technologies that ensure the survival of both her brother and their shared kingdom. Wakanda's queen mother, Ramonda, also guides her son in his role as king and provides the support, encouragement, and uncensored wisdom necessary to keep T'Challa focused on what matters most – the people he serves. With characters like *Black Panther's* strong Wakandan women guiding the way, speculative and science fiction narratives are going beyond just positioning black women in future scenarios – they are imagining black women as integral to constructing the future.

In both academic circles and popular culture, the role of speculative and science fiction as a tool of cultural critique is gaining traction. Noting this trend has made me question why futurism and, perhaps more importantly – why now? Moreover, the ways in which cultural producers and their works are traveling holds significance for reading contemporary speculative works and how we interpret their significance within our increasingly globalized world. I argue that the types of speculative and science fiction being created by writers of color are symptomatic of a larger Pan-African conversation concerning black women's relationship to

globalization – particularly in relation to topics like ecological abuse, diasporic community building, and postcolonialism.

The issues of ecological abuse, postcolonialism, and diasporic community building are not necessarily unique topics to speculative and science fiction but they are integral to understanding how gender is currently being explored within works of black cultural production in our present moment. In other words, I am not privileging the genres of speculative and science fiction as holding exclusive rights to gender-focused critiques by black writers and filmmakers in global context. Rather, I assert that certain aspects found in the speculative and science fiction genre are currently in use as tools through which to investigate this relationship. I qualify my argument here primarily because cultural trends are inherently changeable and fluid. Thus, to label my primary works as belonging exclusively to any generic “tradition” risks pigeonholing them in problematic ways.

### **Troubling Genre: What is Speculative and Science Fiction?**

Although the texts I analyze in this dissertation cannot be homogenized in respect to their adherence to a specific form of futurism, it is important to note the role that speculative and science fiction plays in each of the texts. My decision to analyze this collection of texts is due to the ways in which they deploy certain themes, archetypes, and narrative devices most commonly found in works labeled as science and speculative fiction. However, to use the terms ‘speculative fiction’ and ‘science fiction’ means that one must first qualify how these terms are used in respect to their generic qualifications and use in literary criticism.

In her article “Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge,” Wai Chee Dimock poses the following questions on the nature of genre:

What exactly are genres? Are they a classifying system matching the phenomenal world of objects...Or are they less than that, a taxonomy that never fully taxonomizes, labels that never quite keep things straight? What archives come with genres, what critical lexicons do they offer, and what maps do they yield? And how does the rise of digitization change these archives, lexicons, and maps? (1377)

For Dimock, an investigation of any literary form must first begin with problematizing the very nature of genre. In terms of how genre is used in literary traditions, they are indeed a method for categorization in order to analyze certain narrative structures, devices, and themes. However, the “critical lexicons” that epitomize the nature of genre are constructed in respect to literary traditions as well as their modes of production, distribution, and consumption. In many respects, the digitization of literary works for global consumption and distribution changes the ways in which texts are read and produced.

In respect to how genre has been defined in classical literature, theorists like Benedetto Croce have objected to genre criticism on the following grounds: “[I]nstead of asking before a work of art if it be expressive and what it expresses,” genre criticism only wants to label it, putting it into a pigeonhole, asking only “if it obey the *laws* of epic or of tragedy” (85). Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell make a similar argument in his chapter “The Law of Genre” (1980) wherein he asserts that “As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (57). This practice of border policing is problematic, he argues, since the law of genre inherently contains a “principle of contamination” that overdetermines texts in terms of their adherence to or derivation from specific narrative formulas (59). These rigid laws of genre have led many critics and theorists to dismiss genre theory altogether as a tool of literary criticism.

In “Genre as World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents,” Dimock shares Derrida’s impetus and deconstructs the nature of genre theory altogether and argues that texts should be understood in respect to their movement:

I invoke genre less as a law, a rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsolting system...Such bending and pulling and stretching are unavoidable, for what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight, in some unknown and unpredictable direction. (86)

Here Dimock prioritizes the unknowability, fluidity, and volatility of texts as the defining feature of their relationship to literary criticism. For her, genre is a “self-obsolting system” that must be read in terms of its erasure and restructuring as much as its tendency to taxonomize. Thus, if read through Dimock’s analysis, genre can be read as a *guide* through which to read texts rather than a *law* through which texts should be labeled.

Within the context of this dissertation, I am most interested in how certain aspects of speculative and science fiction are deployed in works of black cultural production – specifically in relation to gender. In many respects, critiques of genre theory found in the work of Dimock, Croce, and Derrida are echoed in literary criticism concerning speculative and science fiction. Most notably, in the collection *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres* (2013), editor P.L. Thomas opens his investigation of science and speculative fiction genres with the assertion that genre and medium can be thought of as “open questions” (4). The inability to define aspects of the science and speculative fiction genre align with a central structuring device found in works traditionally categorized within these genres – the tension between the “known” and “unknown.”

In his 1972 essay “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” Darko Suvin defines the genre of science fiction as “literature of cognitive estrangement” (372). According to Suvin, while estrangement is integral to effective world building within science fiction texts, the narrative must also allow audiences to intimately identify with the protagonists and their world. Thus, a common thread throughout science fiction links the “cognitive estrangement” Suvin describes to various forms of storytelling. Storytelling – whether via myth, legend, spiritual/creation narrative, etc. – is an important tool for creating a relationship between the text and reader in a way that enables readers to orient themselves within the narrative. While cognitive estrangement is largely understood as a defining feature of the science fiction genre, the “tensions,” “false starts,” and “contradictions” that characterize science fiction complicate a strict definition of the genre. Moreover, distinctions between science fiction and speculative fiction are slippery, which has led many critics, theorists, and authors to argue that distinctions between the genres are arbitrary at best.

For instance, labeled as a ‘science fiction’ writer by many publishing houses, prominent author Margaret Atwood finds these labels problematic. In her book *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* (2011), she considers her role in a broader debate on not just what qualifies a text or medium as science fiction, but also what is included in those defining qualities. Atwood’s exploration of the science fiction genre and her work’s labeling as such has come into conversation with a variety of other authors, including self-described “science fiction” author, Ursula Le Guin. Atwood usefully contextualizes the debate surrounding science fiction thus:

In short, what Le Guin means by ‘science fiction’ is what I mean by ‘speculative fiction,’ and what she means by ‘fantasy’ would include some of what I mean by ‘science fiction.’

So that clears all up, more or less. When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefined, and things slip back and forth across them insouciance. (7)

Here Atwood's use of the term 'borders' not only calls attention to her understanding of genre conventions but also the ways in which her own work is categorized. According to Le Guin, Atwood's unwillingness to define her own work as 'science fiction' stems from fear of the stigma surrounding science fiction. According to Le Guin, Atwood "doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto" (5-6). However, for Atwood, her refusal to define her work as science fiction is due to the narrative tropes and themes she uses in her works, which deal less with the role of technology and space exploration and more with speculation about dystopian and/or alternative futures, such as her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The tension between Atwood's and Le Guin's understanding of genre conventions and how these genres are defined highlight the slipperiness of using genre theory to read texts.

Perhaps the most helpful way to integrate genre theory into a reading of texts that are categorized as science and speculative fiction is through Bruce Sterling's concept of "slipstream." According to Sterling, who coined the term 'slipstream' in the 1980s in relation to coherence between genres, he understands genre as a response to specific historical and cultural moments: "A genre arises out of some deeper social need; a genre is not some independent floating construct. Genres gratify people, they satisfy a particular mindset. They gratify a cultural sensibility" ("Slipstream 2" 7). Here Sterling identifies the power of classification and the hegemonic tendencies embedded in such debates. It is through genre that one attempts to define shifts in cultural moments as a homogenous phenomenon. While genre can gratify audiences' desire for a consumable product, it is something altogether different to read texts in relation to specific genre classifications.

Considering how science and speculative fiction are produced, consumed, and read plays an integral role in my reading of the primary texts I have chosen for this dissertation. The ways in which these texts utilize and depart from certain aspects of science and speculative fiction conventions will be read in conversation with their modes of production, distribution, and consumption. One of my primary questions concerns how these texts travel – in terms of their modes of production and distribution, narrative plotlines, as well as the authors’ own connections to various locations. The slipperiness of genre conventions in relation to these texts is also useful for making sense of these works in relation to the circuits of production and consumption that shape them, which are transnational and located across and within particular types of cultural formations, such as museums, film festivals, and digital databases.

### **Transnational Texts, Diasporic Communities**

Reading my primary texts in terms of their movements across genres, spaces, and places requires contextualization. More specifically, what types of movements am I referring to and what do these types of movements contribute to a holistic reading of each text? The texts I examine move between a variety of locations and spaces, including Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada. For instance, in *Brown Girl in the Ring* Nalo Hopkinson uses Toronto, Canada, as the setting for her dystopian novel. The novel’s protagonists are best described as belonging to a Canadian-Caribbean community within post-apocalyptic downtown Toronto, which is referred to as “The Burn” in the narrative. As a Jamaican-born Canadian writer who now lives in California, Hopkinson herself is situated in a variety of locations around the world. In respect to her works’ modes of production and distribution, her narratives, interviews, and literary criticism is written primarily for a Western audience and is circulated in both popular culture and academic literary circles within the U.S. and Canada, respectively. The transnational

connections found in Hopkinson's work are echoed in the other primary texts I analyze in this dissertation. Like their adherence to certain tropes and narrative devices found in speculative and science fiction, the transnationalism of these texts brings them into conversation with one another.

What do I mean when I use the term "transnational"? The term has been used in a variety of ways in academic discourse and popular media. For instance, in *Transnational Feminism in the United States* (2013), Leela Fernandes argues that transnationalism provides a way to conceptualize unfixed racialized identity. By decentering national boundaries, the term calls attention to how power is centralized globally and provides a clearing space to remake one's position in the world. For Fernandes, transnationalism is also a symptom of globalization as people attempt to find new ways to locate themselves outside of certain spheres of power (191). Egyptian author Nawal El-Saadawi describes transnationalism as "globalization from below" in terms of how it provides people forms of solidarity to "work and to fight and to struggle for justice, freedom" ("Counterpoints" 14-15). Technology also plays an important role in creating transnational connections as they create new and varied forms of discourse and provide spaces for people to connect across traditional geographical borders ("Counterpoints" 13).

Transnationalism is frequently paired with another term used to describe connections between Pan-African communities – diaspora. In considering the corpus of texts I have chosen for this dissertation, it is important to distinguish the ways in which the terms transnationalism and diaspora interconnect, but also the ways in which they might also be considered mutually exclusive. The title of this section – "Transnational Texts, Diasporic Communities" – addresses my own understanding of the delineation between these two terms. In "Global Journeys: From Transnationalism to Diaspora," sociologist Nadja C. Johnson attempts to differentiate between

traditional migration theory, which began in the discipline of sociology, and diaspora studies, which she links to cultural studies discourse. For Johnson, diasporas are “nontraditional spheres” that include “groups of migrants originating from the same homeland who have formed transnational movements” (42). The recent surge in the use of the term “diaspora” within academic discourse and popular culture is, according to Johnson, symptomatic of “the political importance of diasporas across the globe” and their “geo-political influence” (42).

Johnson also distinguishes between transnationalism and diaspora in terms of migratory movement or “the movement of people across borders” (43). This focus on migration highlights two important distinctions between transnationalism and diaspora: “(1) diaspora studies’ focus on how members of diaspora *self-identify* as belonging to the diaspora communities and eventually formulate a new movement based on this identity; and (2) the ways in which members of diasporas connect not only with the host country and the home country but also the ways in which they *connect with each other*” (43 emphasis in original). Here Johnson clarifies that transnationalism relates to the movement of peoples while diaspora relates to the forms of community people create in relation to their migratory patterns. Thus, diaspora can be read both in terms of migration as well as a function of identity building. In other words, diasporas are best understood as a social process while transnationalism generally refers to the blurring of geo-political borders.

While Johnson outlines the distinctions between transnationalism and diaspora in relation to the disciplines of sociology and cultural studies, she notes that it is “important to remember that among scholars focused on migrant networks, identity politics, cultural politics, and global movements the definition of ‘diaspora’ remains highly contested” (44). Like my discussion of genre, the semantics of the terms transnationalism and diaspora can be problematized to the point

where it is less helpful to see them as categorical tools and more beneficial to determine their usefulness specifically in relation to analyzing texts. When read in conversation with primary texts, these terms can be problematized and refined in ways that provide new ways of understanding the terms themselves. In other words, rather than reading texts prescriptively through terms like diaspora and transnationalism, how might the texts provide new ways for understanding these concepts? When viewed from this perspective, terms like genre, diaspora, and transnationalism become less about the categorization of texts and more like guiding blueprints through which to reconsider how texts problematize highly politicized issues such as community, migration, and racial identity.

### **Global Futures: Situating Black Speculative Thought**

The texts and films examined in this dissertation - as well as the authors and filmmakers who create them - are frequently described as belonging to an emerging movement that uses the speculative to explore any number of themes related to black identity, history, and experience. In the post-World War II era, and in the wake of independence movements in areas currently categorized as the Global South, activists and leaders in Pan-African and Civil Rights movements like Malcolm X, Thomas Sankara, Claudia Jones, and Steve Biko fostered the ideas necessary to create real and lasting socio-cultural and political change for black communities around the world. The onset of the 60's and 70's inspired many creative intellectuals, artists, and writers such as Sun Ra, Octavia Butler, George Clinton, Fela Kuti, Samuel Delaney, and Jean-Michel Basquiat to use creative expression as a form of socio-cultural critique. As the twentieth-century came to a close, academic discourse turned to conceptualizing issues facing communities of color by carving out intellectual space to consider the impact of multinational, neoliberal, geopolitical, and economic forms of hegemonic power.

In the twenty-first century, the influence of globalized matrices of power on communities of color across the world - but particularly in what is now called the Global South - remains a central point of tension in academic and popular debates.<sup>1</sup> These debates now include the increasing relevance of online forums and access to digital technologies that in some cases foster transnational community building while in other cases widen technological, social, and economic inequalities. Within larger conversations on issues facing Pan-African communities, re-envisioning self-determination and agency within an increasingly techno-progressive world is of primary importance for scholars, activists, and writers like Alondra Nelson, Paul D. Miller, and Anna Everett, among others. While limited access to digital technologies has largely been cited as responsible for the marginalization of Africa and other countries in the Global South in terms of their presence in gaining socio-political and economic capital at the same rate as the Global North, connections via cyber-culture have been made between black communities in Africa, the Caribbean, the U.K., the U.S., and even Canada. For instance, Kodwo Eshun's work with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) and John Akomfrah's vision for the Black Audio Film collective have played a significant role in developing black cyber-culture as it exists in its current form.

The forms of creative expression and socio-cultural connection made available through cyber-culture have created the conditions for new forms of Pan-African community building, which is broadly reflected through black speculative and science fiction works. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> The highly contentious term 'Global South' is best understood as an emerging concept within transcontinental and postcolonial studies that is generally understood as a reworking of terms like the geo-politically grounded 'Third World' and economically-focused term 'developing countries/regions.' According to Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell, the Global South refers largely to the regions of Latin America, Oceania, Africa, and Asia and the "interconnected histories of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained" ("The Global South" 12).

Sheree Renee Thomas' anthologies, *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* in 2000 and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* in 2004 helped set the stage for conversations on cross-cultural and transnational exchange between diasporic authors that led to the publication of similar edited collections like *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Authors* (2013). These anthologies contain collections of short stories, interviews, and essays that can be read as a transnational conversation and form of diasporic community building. Through speculative and science fiction, black communities are engaging in conversations on what it means to be black in an increasingly globalized world and, more specifically, what role black artists and intellectuals play in the 21st century.

In his manifesto, "Afrofuturism 2.0 and The Black Speculative Arts Movement," Reynaldo Anderson asserts that black speculative art "is a creative, aesthetic practice that integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future" (231). For Anderson, the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) is a larger movement within which sub-genres like Afrofuturism can be situated. For scholars like Tiffany Barber, the roots of Afrofuturism and the Black Speculative Arts Movement can be traced back to the Black Arts Movement or BAM of the 1960's and 1970's in respect to their focus on how issues like social responsibility and radical politics impact black artistic production. For Barber, contemporary iterations of this movement rearticulate these debates and expand "our understandings of blackness's multi-dimensionality, the good and the bad, the respectable and the undesirable" (232).

When the Black Speculative Arts Movement is discussed in academic circles and popular culture, the most common pioneers mentioned include the African American jazz musician, Sun

Ra, who sported electric space suits in the 1950's, and African American author, Octavia Butler, who used futurist themes and narrative structures to explore black experience in the American context. One can go back further in history, however, with W.E.B. DuBois's 1908 short story "The Princess Steel," which features characters like a black sociologist who invents a "Mega-scope" that allows him to see across space and time. Additionally, DuBois' later more well-known short story "The Comet" (1920) discusses race relations in the U.S. under Jim Crow by creating a post-apocalyptic scenario wherein two characters – Jim Davis (a black man) and Julia (a wealthy white woman) must craft a survival strategy after a comet kills everyone in New York except them.

Works by musicians, artists, and authors like Butler, Ra, and DuBois are currently categorized under a sub-genre of science and speculative fiction called "Afrofuturism." Even after cyber-culture theorist and literary critic, Mark Dery, coined the term in 1993, it did not surface in popular discourse until roughly a decade ago. At the time of its inception as a catchphrase in academic literary circles, Dery described Afrofuturism as "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (*Flame Wars* 180). As it is broadly defined, Afrofuturism is conceptualized as a movement/genre/aesthetic used to speculate about the future as a way to discuss imbalances of power that exist in the present moment.

Afrofuturism can also be understood as a re-appropriation of history and an alternative perspective on mainstream attitudes towards technology, culture, and the future.

Through the use of science and speculative fiction imagery and narrative tropes, Afrofuturism commonly involves a collapsing of space and time, which provides opportunities

for critical engagement of past, present, and future tenses. In this reframing of history, those who are systematically oppressed are capable of transcending technologies of racial/ethnic and gender-based oppression. For instance, Sun Ra's vision of an all-black planet in his 1974 film, *Space is the Place*, challenges the notion of time altogether. In the film, he stresses, "Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended" ("Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra in Space is the Place"). Ra's comments highlight the difficulties associated with constructing history and time in the wake of slavery and the continued systematic disenfranchisement of black populations around the world.

Ra's observation is supported by Dery, who proposes what he deems the central question of Afrofuturism: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (*Flame Wars* 180). In his 2003 essay "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," Kodwo Eshun concludes: "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (301). Afrofuturism thus becomes, for Eshun, both an aesthetic for works of cultural production as well as an interventionist 'tool' for evaluating those works.

More recently, cultural critics like Martine Syms assert that Afrofuturism should focus more heavily on black humanity and an assessment of "true, vernacular reality" rather than on traditional speculative and science fiction tropes (2014). In her website publication, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," inspired by a manifesto from the 2004 Clarion West Writers' Workshop, Syms calls for Afrofuturism to include more "mundane" representations of black life

rooted in the future of humanity on Earth, rather than on spaceships or alien worlds. In the manifesto, Syms states, “While we are often Othered, we are not aliens. Though our ancestors were mutilated, we are not mutants” (“The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto”). She argues for the production of mundane Afrofuturist literature with no interstellar travel (too time-consuming and expensive); no “inexplicable end to racism;” no aliens, alternate universes, or revisionist history; and no tropes of mammies or obeah women (“The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto”). In short, Syms pushes Afrofuturism to evolve into a realist tool of social critique that confronts the complicated nature of structural racism and sexism.

In “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” Dery begins his overview of Afrofuturism with literary examples drawn from the works of seminal African American author Samuel Delaney and Ralph Ellison. He soon expands the term to include visual and musical artists like John Sayles, George Clinton, Afrika Bambaataa, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Although the concept of Afrofuturism originally was cited as relating to African American works rather than an inclusive black (global) community, Pan-African authors and artists have played a central role in framing the larger movement, with voices such as Perry and Basquiat featuring heavily. Dery also calls attention to the contribution of Jamaican Lee “Scratch” Perry, who is credited with bringing Rastafarian cosmology into the Afrofuturist canon.

While in the 1990’s contemporary black speculative thought was framed largely as a response to institutional racism, technology, and institutional racism in relation to African American experience, it is rapidly evolving into a global phenomenon. As Nnedi Okorafor, a prolific writer of young adult fiction and author of a forthcoming six-issue *Black Panther* digital comic has noted, Afrofuturism “has traditionally been based and rooted far too much in

American culture,” arguing for the promotion of what she calls “Africa-based sci-fi” (Bennett 2018). This push toward a global black speculative movement is facilitated in large part by advances in technology and cyber-culture. For instance, in 1998 Alondra Nelson widened the scope of Afrofuturism by creating an online presence for fellow lovers of science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, comics, cosplay, and magical realism within the black community. Nelson’s digital space has encouraged more transnational and Pan-African exchange, which has reconstituted what black futurism looks like in popular culture. Examples of this phenomenon include works by the Nigerian visual artist Fatimah Tuggar, who uses collage to explore the socio-cultural impact of technology on Africans. Using a style commonly referred to as *bricolage*, her work juxtaposes images of African and Western daily life in order to deconstruct preconceived notions about gendered subjectivity, notions of progress/modernity, and diasporic belonging.

In a 2002 interview with Nelson, Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson states that she hopes for “more diverse expressions of people's lived experiences of race, culture, class, sexuality, social structures, and gender, and that more of those expressions will begin to come from outside the United States” (“Making the Impossible Possible” 113). A close look at artists, writers, and filmmakers currently cited within the Afrofuturist movement reveals that the cultural and global diversity Hopkinson calls for does indeed exist. From the work of Kamau Brathwaite to Robert Antoni, black futurist fiction and film does come from outside of the United States, which force us to consider how black speculative works might be best understood as inherently diasporic and transnational.

A term that attempts to describe black speculative movements as belonging to a larger diasporic body of critical thought is Reynaldo Anderson’s concept of Afrofuturism 2.0. In

“Afrofuturism 2.0 and The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto” (2016), Anderson asserts that “Afrofuturism 2.0 is the beginning of both a move away and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the twentieth century’s early formulation of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples, especially in North America, had been deliberately erased” (223). In contrast to early iterations of Afrofuturism as rooted primarily in literary arts movements, Anderson and others see the current wave of Afrofuturist works as a part of a “critical project with the mission of laying the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism, critical theory, science or technology” (223-224 emphasis in original).

In the edited collection, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (2015), editors Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones contextualize Afrofuturism 2.0 as

The early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating the influence of network software, database logic, cultural analytics, deep remixability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, the speculative sphere, with transdisciplinary applications and has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement. (x)

In this definition of Afrofuturism 2.0, Anderson and Jones highlight the ways in which black futurism is moving toward deeply hybrid ways of engaging with and understanding black identity within an increasingly globalized world. Their assertion that Afrofuturism 2.0 can be understood as a “diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement” calls attention to the ways in which black cyber-culture is blurring national boundaries and re-conceptualizing diasporic communities.

In a 2017 interview with Abiola Oke of OkayAfrica.com, Okorafor defines herself as a 100 percent ‘Naijamerican’ writer – a term she finds more true to her experience as an American-born child of Nigerian parents than labels like ‘writer of Science Fiction’ or ‘Afrofuturist’” (“In Conversation”). Here Okorafor calls attention to two important aspects of defining black speculative works– 1. the problematic nature of using genre as a prescriptive framework through which to define an author and her/his work; and 2. the importance of reading these works as produced in relationship to transnational networks and diasporic identity markers. Okorafor’s reference to her own ethnic/racial identity as “Naijamerican” rather than African American indicates her desire to conceptualize diasporic identity in relation to transnational movement and exchange.

Okorafor also challenges labels like Afrofuturism in respect to modes of production, distribution, and consumption of texts – especially in a Western context. For her, Western publishing houses have an investment in marketing “certain types of African narratives” with “stories that portray Africa in a certain type of way - with poverty, disease, and war” (“In Conversation”). From her perspective, identifying as someone who is both African and diasporic opens up a space for understanding and dialogue between African and African diasporic communities. Moreover, the relevance of globalization in creating transnational connections that facilitate this dialogue are part and parcel of black futurism in its current 2.0 stage. Okorafor’s comments highlight that representations that imagine alternative futures for black people in popular media on a global scale are integral to changing current misconceptions about Africa and black identity in general. Imagining new roles in which African and African diasporic people play the hero and scientist rather than the sidekick, slave, and/or experimental ‘guinea pig’ also

uses the power of imagination to challenge Eurocentric narratives and their presumed authority as the sole interpreters of black lives and futures.

### **Beyond Genre: The Transnational Connections Shaping Global Black Futures**

In an interview on the African perspective of Afrofuturism, Nigerian visual artist and designer, Walé Oyéjidé, describes his experience of watching *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* in Nigeria, and how he and his friends “hoped to see [themselves] on screen” (Thrasher 2015). Similarly, he described the 2009 South African-made film, *District 9*, as “an awesome film” but “pretty problematic” for Nigerians. Too often, he mentions, images of the African continent only offer doom, gloom and terrorist attacks, full of “faceless brown people used as puppets.” To him, Afrofuturism should offer a way out of depicting black people in a limited way, and instead provide a vision of Africans with a “shout out to the future” (Thrasher 2015). While negative stereotyping of Africa and Africans remains pervasive, the call for Africans to claim their future through the use of futurist themes and images is becoming increasingly common. In a recent newscast titled “Afrofuturism: The Future of African Art,” commentator Barbara Loundon states: “Afrofuturism is about the future of Africa projected by Africans themselves” (2017). Loundon’s statement demonstrates that Africans are beginning to take an increased interest in science and speculative fiction as a tool through which to imagine their futures.

In its current usage, Afrofuturism is not merely a tool of representation but also a technique that incorporates a wide variety of trans and interdisciplinary mediums to build connections between the histories of African and African descended peoples. Per Deidre Lynn Hollman, “Afrofuturism is black survival. It is an affirmative aesthetic and philosophical position that questions *how* we will survive in the future, not *if* we will. It asks what do we need to know, how do we need to adapt, what knowledge do we need to take with us, what new ways of being

do we need to create, and how do we retain our ancestral memory” (Hardison 2017). For Hollman, Afrofuturism is a tool that can be used to both affirm black identity and protect it against damaging forms of historical repetition. In other words, working through the trauma of the past in order to create a healthy future that benefits black people and their communities as a whole.

However, the term Afrofuturism is also cited by many as exclusive and insular - particularly in relation to conceptualizing global black futures. In “What is Afrofuturism to Africa?,” media artist and lecturer, Tegan Bristow, laments that “Afrofuturism has nothing to do with Africa, and everything to do with cyber-culture in the West” (2012). She goes on to explain that she sees Afrofuturism as a similar theoretical lens as Cyberfeminism, which critiques the “centralised and outward looking view of technology and its power associated culture in the west” – also known as globalization (2012). While Bristow asserts that “Afrofuturism is not the science fiction of Africa, but a critical engagement with technology, Anderson and Jones challenge this argument in their introductory chapter of *Afrofuturism 2.0*. According to them, Afrofuturism and Africa are indeed linked for two reasons: “Africa and its diaspora are connected via cyber-culture and have exchanged ideas, art and politics since the nineteenth century...(and) the African diaspora has been institutionally designated the sixth zone of The African Union” (ix).

I agree with aspects of Bristow’s argument inasmuch as works frequently described as Afrofuturist do indeed tend to focus on Western-derived forms of technoscience that do not necessarily impact the socio-cultural realities of many African societies in the same way as in the West. However, like Anderson and Jones, I find validity in the argument that cyber-culture plays an important role in connecting Africa to its diaspora in ways that encourage cross-cultural forms

of exchange. As such, even technological advances like the creation of streaming platforms like YouTube.com have led to the transmission of Pan-African futurist visions across the world. Likewise, videos, art, fashion, media, literature, music, and socio-cultural movements created by black communities in the West inflect the ways in which Pan-African people - both inside the continent and throughout the diaspora - build their own futures. As futuristic visions of blackness spread to new locations around the world, new concepts of black experience are crafted that reflect the localized cultural modes of each space.

One way in which futurism broadens the borders between African and diasporic communities is through narratives that feature the concept of time manipulation. For instance, in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007), the fourth novel by Jamaican author, sociologist, and social activist, Erna Brodber, time and space do not adhere to traditional boundaries. Rather, the narrative operates according to a concept called "the free" which exists between place and time. According to literary scholar Kelly Baker Josephs, Brodber's narrative structure force readers to set aside assumptions about the fixity of time and see historical events as simultaneously possible. For instance, Josephs asserts that by using Caribbean cultural systems or 'cosmologies' like forms of religious worship and celebration (Vodou, Santeria, carnival, etc.), healing and divination rites such as obeah, and instrumental music (drums and oral storytelling) to structure her novel, Brodber destabilizes the fixity of time ("Beyond Geography, Past Time" 124). Mixing mythical origin stories with what is presented as the 'real' history of the main characters allows authors like Brodber to use speculative and science fiction narrative devices to challenge historical narratives.

In an interview with Tiara Jante of Blackscifi.com, self-proclaimed Afrofuturist Rasheedah Phillips, founder of the grassroots organization *The Afrofuturist Affair* and creator of

the concept of “black quantum futurism,” argues that “Afrofuturism uses a completely different construct of time and engages a different notion of time consciousness and notion of the future than does the European brand of futurism, which is based on linear constructs of time and progress, and remnants of Newtonian physics updated with some Einstein relativity” (“Science Is Fiction” 2016). Her fictional and theoretical writings, *Recurrence Plot (and Other Time Travel Tales)* and *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory & Practice (Volume 1)*, are meant to bridge a gap between the warped histories “reflected in generations of people who have been fed lies about who they truly were and are” and a sense of rootedness to places, things and people that allow communities of color to imagine a better future (2016).

The evolution of black futurism includes a wide range of experiences and voices, many of which are distinctly diasporic in tone and content. However, if black futurist texts do nothing else, they destabilize not only notions of time but also of space, which can lead to the blurring of geographical boundaries. To return to a previous example, Brodber’s *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* uses a blending of science and fiction indicative of Afrofuturist themes to address concepts like Caribbean identity, blackness, and liberation. She also uses narrative loops to imagine various routes taken by African diasporic peoples, focusing on links between characters and how their possible futures shape pockets of the Africana community. Brodber’s focus on disrupting the misconception that all black communities are homogenous materializes in the novel through fictive strategies that refuse any form of temporal or spatial fixity. This loosening of time and space also destabilizes Caribbean countries as fixed nation-states which, in certain cases, remain under the control of colonial powers as *départements d’outre-mer* (overseas territories). Free from the constraints of Western notions of time and space, Brodber’s Caribbean holds the promise of a united nation-state liberated from geo-political conflicts.

As noted in Okorafor's interview with Abiola Oke, black futurist visions can also highlight points of division between Africa and its diaspora. Many times, the blending of temporalities and histories used in these works reenacts the movement between Africa and the West via the Middle Passage in problematic ways. In "Africa as an Alien Future: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds," Ruth Mayer states that 'Afrofuturist' works tend to "move ceaselessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones" in order to locate the significance of Africa within the African American cultural imaginary (557). Caught between the idea of Africa as a lost continent in the past and Africa as an alien future, Mayer points out a potential failing of Afrofuturist works produced in the West - their tendency to conceptualize Africa as a metaphorical space in which to work through historical memory rather than a continent pushing toward economic and political stability.

While some futurist visions of Africa can depict the continent as a gap in historical memory, Africans are increasingly using speculative and science fiction to re-imagine transnational politics. For instance, Beninese filmmaker Sylvestre Amoussou's 2006 satirical film, *Africa Paradis*, uses the narrative trope of alternative histories to comment on the plight of African refugees in Europe. Set in the year 2033, the United States of Africa is portrayed as a refuge for European immigrants, who flee to Africa in order to escape poverty and economic instability. As French citizens, the film's main protagonists, Olivier and Pauline, emigrate to Africa in search of a better life despite their fears of anti-European discrimination. As a commentary on Africa's current refugee crisis – an issue that has persisted and grown more pressing in the years since the film's release – Amoussou invites viewers to both consider

Africa's role in boosting European economic expansion through African labor as well as question the continued problem of systemic racism towards black populations worldwide.

### **Black Female Futures and Diasporic Community Building**

The slipperiness of genre conventions, transnational connections, and diasporic communities also applies to the ways in which works of black cultural production theorize about gender. In "Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis" (2008), Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J.T. Way contextualize transnationalism in relation to "genealogies of anti-imperial and decolonizing thought, ranging from anticolonial Marxism to subaltern studies to Third World feminism and feminisms of color" (628). As people travel and create new diasporic communities across transnational boundaries, theories concerning their relationship to gender formation also takes on new and varied forms. Terms found in African and diasporic women's theorizing of difference have functioned in both helpful and problematic ways. While using terms that align with larger feminist movements provide a platform to problematize these movements, these terms fail to perform a meaningful space clearing since they re-inscribe the same paradigms that marginalize them (i.e. Third World *feminism*).

Critical syntheses of black women's theories of identity stems largely from black feminist and womanist traditions, with texts like *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981) by Filomina Chioma Steady, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) by Alice Walker, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) by Carole Boyce Davies, and *Moving Beyond Boundaries*, volumes 1 and 2 (1995), by Carole Boyce Davies and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie featuring prominently. Additionally, in her reworking of Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) concept of interlocking systems of oppression, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality functions as a lens through which to consider the relationship between

categories like social class, race, gender, and the law. As Collins points out in “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond” (2001), Walker’s concept of womanism has at times been used interchangeably with black feminism since both are meant to exemplify “a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination” (10). However, Collins clarifies that both terms come from standpoints in relation to black women’s theorizing of difference.

Walker’s theory of womanism is rooted in African-American women’s forms of storytelling that create the conditions for women-centered community building and bonding. While Walker’s position stems from the African-American experience, womanism does include the global or universal oppression of women. According to Walker, “When [I] thought of women moving, [I] automatically thought of women all over the world. . . . [I] had traveled and had every reason to understand that women’s freedom was an idea whose time had come, and that it was sweeping the world” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* 378). For Walker, womanism’s universalist focus distinguishes it from early iterations of black feminism because the term “feminist” was a term used by elite, privileged white women who historically ignored the complex realities of black women and other women of color. Moreover, Walker’s framing of womanism as distinct from feminism is largely because within the mainstream feminist movement she was not seen as a woman, but as simply black. In a 1989 interview Walker asserts, “As a poet, I really object to these words where you have to hang on some color or other thing to make it visible. I wanted a word that was visible in itself because it came out of my own culture” (deVeaux 122). As a result, Walker’s concept of womanism was intended to be distinct from black feminism in order to avoid the problematic classification of feminist in relation to black women’s theories of identity formation. In other words, Walker was interested

in creating a term that did not exclude black women, yet did not make them visible simply *because they were black*.

Walker's use of the term womanist can be read as an attempt to problematize the very structure upon which the terms 'black' and 'woman' are built. Theorists like Sylvia Wynter have addressed the challenge of constructing any theoretical framework for discussing black women's identity formation. In "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Unsilencing the Demonic Ground of Caliban's Woman" (2000), Wynter positions the Afro-Caribbean-American concepts of "womanist/feminist" against Luce Irigaray's purely Western assumption of a universal category – "woman" – whose "silenced" ground is the condition of what she calls a universally applicable "patriarchal discourse" ("Beyond Miranda's Meanings" 109). In a witty parodying of Irigaray's deconstruction of Freud's phallogocentric thought on the dualism between male/active and female/passive, Wynter posits that the variable of "race/racial" difference is and has been since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, within Eurocentric thought, considered "destiny" more than gender (112). In other words, a hierarchy developed with the spread of slavery and imperialism that situated the dichotomy between men/native as holding more primacy than male/female within Western epistemologies.

Wynter's analysis points out that Irigaray's "patriarchal discourse" has built itself on the "silenced ground" of women and post-16<sup>th</sup> century on the new primarily silenced ground of the majority populations of the globe. For Wynter, this allows Irigaray a position from which to speak and implicates her as a co-participant, if to a lesser derived extent, in the power and privileges created by white supremacy. Wynter argues that this dialectic of sameness/difference must be considered in relation to the theory/discourse of feminism and the relation of sameness and difference which is expressed in the term "womanist" or other various terms (119). She also

calls attention to the insufficiency of all existing theoretical models, both to “voice” the “silenced” ground of the experience of the “native” Caribbean woman and Black American women. For Wynter, a new theoretical model is required to re-conceptualize the variable “race” to describe black female experiences in ways that do not replicate Western feminist dichotomies of gender, race, class, or cultural identity. In shifting from broader debates on black women’s experience in the world rooted in theories like black feminism and womanism to Wynter’s deconstruction of these terms altogether, I aim to highlight the slipperiness of categorization in respect to how we read discussions of gender in works of black cultural production.

Theories that expand on black feminism and womanism are diverse, including those that draw from speculative and science fiction traditions. Afrofuturist feminism is one such derivation of the intersection between the black speculative thought and black feminism. According to writer and artist Tanekeya Word, Afrofuturist feminism is “rooted in ethnicity and gender” and commonly linked to cyberfeminism (in which the cyborg is the ultimate evolution) (2015). Derived in large part from Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1984), which describes the cyborg as a genderless entity that inhabits a space outside of race, sex, class, and thus procreation and family structures, theorists who identify with cyberfeminism often use the cyborg to call attention to these very socio-cultural structures. Per scholars like Jessie Daniels, cyberfeminism “refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture” with no set identifiable origin or feminist political project (“Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s)” 102). Afrofuturist feminism and cyberfeminism both occupy a space within radical feminist thought; however, according to Word, the ambivalent universal framing underpinning cyberfeminism leaves “no room in their structure for race, othering the black body within feminism for decades” (2015).

Word goes on to mention that although “Afrofuturist feminists [may] shapeshift, hybridization, including robotics, may occur – it’s not a permanent state that negates the black female body” (2015). For Ytasha Womack, one of the pioneers of Afrofuturism as a digital movement and the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Afrofuturism offers an intersectional way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black cultural lens. It is non-linear, fluid and feminist; it uses the black imagination to consider mysticism, metaphysics, identity and liberation by blending the future, past, and present. In other words, Afrofuturism provides an imaginative space where black women can explore the limits of their bodies without having to adhere to norms of Eurocentric heteronormativity. Given that speculative and science fiction narrative schemes provide a space to perform and re-perform what it means to be human, subject positions are fluid and transparent rather than fixed and normalized. The manipulation of subject positions found in speculative and science fiction works by and about black women can thus be read as enacting a form of social change that circulates and disrupts dominant constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and identity.

Rather than using technology solely as a tool of emancipation and transcendence, futurist themes are frequently used to illustrate the new forms of exclusion technoscience has created. For example, while the concept of the posthuman has been largely praised in the West, as we explore our future bodies and our future selves, it is important to consider exactly who “we” are. Technology is neither emancipatory nor repressive in and of itself and can be used to signify new forms of exclusion as well as new spaces of freedom. Therefore, to speak of the posthuman and, by default, the postmodern theory that the body is an obsolete relic, ignores the lived realities of *all* bodies. As Sheryl Vint asserts, the “ability to construct the body as passé” does not exist for

“those who still need to rely on the work of their bodies to produce the means of survival, for those who lack access to technologies that can erase the effects of illness, and for those whose lives continue to be structured by racist, sexist, homophobic, and other body-based discourses of discrimination” (8-9). Vint’s contention calls to light the potential consequences of erasing the body as a site of meaning and value. After all, if bodies no longer exist, then how can one discuss things like sexual violence, racism, homophobia, and other forms of human rights abuses and discrimination acted out on bodies? Thus, to erase the body is to erase the people who must speak *through* and *about* their bodies to enact social change.

In her analysis of Kenyan-born British/American artist Wangechi Mutu’s collage, *Non je ne regrette rien* (2007), Tiffany E. Barber addresses how the central maimed figure – part human, part machine, part animal – is used as a grotesque representation of black female bodies to illustrate a unique approach to black female subjectivity that Barber coins “transgressive disfigurement” (4). The concept of transgressive disfigurement, Barber argues, pictures ways of being not predicated on wholeness but instead incorporates “alternate, at times violent or ‘undesirable’ forms of transformation that serve to produce dismembered black female bodies” (4). As Barber’s analysis illustrates, in many cases the speculative visions portrayed in my primary works are at once hopeful and bleak, empowering and repressive. There are no easy solutions or methods of escape, especially for female protagonists. Instead, the themes and narratives in these works rely on ambivalence as a framework through which to explore the historical memory and lived realities which many women deal with on the continent and diaspora.

Rather than imagining an easy escape from repressive spaces, artists like Mutu use boundary confusion as a means through which to dispel the Cartesian idea of a unified, self-

possessed body. By so doing, Mutu calls attention to how black women's bodies are seen and acquire meaning. Works like *Non je ne regrette rien* demonstrate how black women's bodies are assembled and disassembled according to dominant discourses of what constitutes as 'human.' Her blending of machine, animal, organic matter, and human body parts thus challenges viewers to consider what we assume when we 'read' black women's bodies. Boundary confusion and fragmentation illustrate how black female bodies are appropriated as imagery through which issues of postcolonial identity, ecological preservation, and diasporic community building are reimagined.

From Wangechi Mutu's *The End of eating Everything* to Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the works I analyze in this dissertation address how socio-cultural, geo-political, and economic issues impact the lived realities of black women living on the continent and diaspora. These works make us question why speculative and science fiction tropes, themes, and imagery offer such refreshing possibilities for imagining black women's futures. Moreover, they force us to question what is at stake in privileging works that dismember women's bodies so as to call attention to socio-cultural injustices. While there are moments of reclamation – for example, the self-sacrifice of Ibi Zoboi's female protagonist to restore ecological balance in "The Farming of the Gods," or the use of women's sexual energy to bring down a corrupt Cameroonian politician in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* – it is women's bodies that are literally and figuratively put 'in the line of fire' to challenge present injustices and create a better future.

### **Speculative Archetypes and Black Women's Futures**

While my analysis of each primary text will be framed within the context of broader traditions like science and speculative fiction, transnationalism, and diaspora studies, as well as black women's theories of difference, I intend to focus on how each text comes into conversation

with these traditions rather than producing prescriptive readings of the texts. In many cases, the texts exceed current formulations of these terms. Thus, my use of the terms science and speculative fiction, transnationalism, diaspora, and any assortment of theories related to black women's experience(s) will be qualified in relation to how I read each text engaging with these topics.

Reading and writing fiction has always occupied a potent place in black women's studies practices. The novels and films I examine throughout this dissertation stem from a variety of transnational contexts; the genre, language, and modes of circulation and distribution all mark histories of colonial, post-colonial, and neocolonial struggle. In many cases, it is on the 'terrain' of black women's bodies that socio-political issues such as family law, migration, taxation, and labor policies are written and renegotiated. The material practice of resisting and reclaiming their space, identities, and bodies is done as much through the act of writing as through institutional discourse. In fact, readings may in fact function as technologies for constructing what counts as women's experience. Moreover, it can map connections and ruptures among women and the social movements they build as they construct and re-imagine their worlds at a local and global level.

I argue that the novels, short stories, and films examined in this dissertation use aspects of speculative and science fiction as a lens through which to imagine black women's futures globally. Representations of future spaces are largely concerned with science and technology, and the collection of works I have chosen to analyze in this dissertation acknowledge the tenuous relationship black communities have historically had with these fields. In science's recent past black bodies were treated violently, with black women's bodies treated as especially alien or Other. Via science and/or speculative themes, adopting an alien, cyborg, or robot alter ego

reclaims this historically-based negative relationship with science and technology. It is hardly surprising, then, that themes of the body factor into the work of those who are frequently defined as “Afrofuturist” women filmmakers, artists, and authors so strongly (i.e. Janelle Monae/Cindi Mayweather, Wanuri Kahiu, Wangechi Mutu, etc.). Whether through narrative tropes, artistic mediums, or digitized special effects, the cyborg or techno-based alter ego can transcend limitations imposed on black women’s bodies and identities. This imagery also engages with and challenges contemporary forms of technology, alternative and imagined realities, and pop culture phenomena.

I argue that my primary works use archetypes as vehicles through which to imagine what black women’s futures might look like. In these novels and films both the landscape and the female characters themselves shift. These female characters are, without exception, provided otherworldly and superhuman powers through which to change their living conditions and surroundings. Through archetypes like the superhero, vampire, zombie, cyborg and a figure I call ‘the anthropomorphoid,’ each emphasize the role black women play in challenging nefarious effects of global capitalism and creating new modes of expression and self-determination. In many cases, these archetypes either stem from or are adapted to Pan-African systems of cultural knowledge in ways that are sometimes hybridized with their use in traditional science and speculative fiction narratives.

In terms of their hybridization, the archetypes I discuss - and the works in which they are situated - can be understood as transnational. For instance, the zombie archetype might historically relate to fears about immigration, the mixing of racial bloodlines, and consumerism in the U.S. context. However, its use Caribbean spaces such as Haiti can be less metaphorical and instead relate closely to cultural belief systems that are part of people’s everyday lives. Thus,

the significance of these archetypal figures takes on new and varied meanings depending on the cultural context in which they are incorporated. When integrated into a setting that blurs the lines between national boundaries, these figures can be used to illustrate how modes of knowledge and cultural expression travel and evolve. Moreover, these archetypes demonstrate how black populations around the world are re-conceptualizing their communities.

### **Description of Chapters**

Each chapter of this dissertation that examines primary works is organized around specific archetypes that serve as useful guides through which to analyze how black women's futures are being imagined in a global context. To explain how I organize my analyses of each primary text, I now turn to a description of my chapters. To begin, in "Theorizing Black Women's Futures" I contextualize how writers, artists, and filmmakers use imagery, tropes, and archetypes typically linked to speculative and science fiction traditions to theorize about black women's futures. The works I analyze in this dissertation challenge conventional ideas of gender, environmental ethics, race/ethnicity, nation, and diaspora. Through archetypal figures like the zombie, vampire, cyborg, superhero, and the anthropomorphoid, I examine how these works explore the relationship between transnational movement and black women's forms of diasporic community building. I argue that these archetypes can be usefully brought into conversation with black women's theories of difference - specifically in relation to how globalization is increasingly impacting their lives. Moreover, these archetypal figures challenge contested boundaries, definitions of bodies, and socio-cultural territories. I argue that my primary works can be read as operating within broader theoretical discourses on black women's lived experiences, particularly in relation to how they discuss ecological abuse, postcolonialism, and diasporic identity. The distant planets, futuristic time frames, and forms of techno-science used

in these works explore power relations in different ways from the realist genre. Indeed, imaginative worldscapes can be read as the map upon which theories are tested and re-worked.

In my second chapter, “Gendered Ecologies and Anthropomorphism in Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything* and Ibi Zoboi’s “The Farming of the Gods,” I examine how Mutu’s provocative digital film installation and Zoboi’s short story imagine black futures through a careful examination of ecological images, symbols, and narratives – specifically through a figure I call the anthropomorphoid. Given that anthropomorphism has received little attention within literary criticism on black futurist works, I attempt to fill this lacuna by examining the role anthropomorphism plays in two works – one by a Haitian-American author and another by a Kenyan-born British/American filmmaker and visual artist. My argument is twofold: first, I take my cue from Mutu’s assertion that imaginative forms of world-building must connect systemic corruption to consumptive practices. Second, I claim that these works use geographical spaces marked by ecological abuse (poisonous spores, pustules, desert landscapes), displacement (discarded objects, displaced populations/refugees), and violence (human limbs, eugenics) to negotiate the symbolic and material “marking” of black female bodies. Ultimately, I demonstrate how *The End of eating Everything* and “The Farming of the Gods” open up new ways of imagining and understanding the complex ways in which ecology and gender are currently being discussed in relation to black futurity.

In my third chapter, “Diasporic Superheroines in Nnedi Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*,” I examine how the protagonists in Jamaican/Canadian/American author Nalo Hopkinson’s novel and “Naijamerican” writer Nnedi Okorafor’s novel use the superhero trope as a way of working through issues of diaspora and the transgression of national boundaries. I argue that the texts analyzed offer epistemological tools to

better understand the gendered, ethnic/racial, and nation-based signifiers that exist between black diasporic communities, especially those that have come about as a result of migrations from Africa and the Caribbean. The special “powers” used by Okorafor’s and Hopkinson’s superheroines call attention to evolving forms of black identity formation among women in North America and Canada, respectively. Themes like cultural appropriation, hybridized spiritual practices, and generational family ties are addressed within speculative frameworks and settings in order to provide characters with tools to reimagine their diasporic identities in new and complex ways. By mixing various language patterns, combining Western landscapes with Afro-Caribbean socio-cultural norms, and assigning multiple identities – in some cases an amalgamation of the human, inhuman, animal, ecological, and supernatural – to their superheroines, Okorafor and Hopkinson navigate the messy and oft-times undefinable nature of diaspora.

In my fourth chapter, “Cyborgs, Zombies, and Vampires: The Gendered Politics of Dystopia in Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes*,” I examine the film, *Les Saignantes* (2009), to argue that the film’s director, Bekolo, uses the archetypes of the cyborg, zombie, and vampire to illustrate forms of gendered resistance within the African postcolony. Using the speculative provides Bekolo with an imaginative framework in which to explore feminine modes of resistance to what Cameroonian philosopher, public intellectual, and scholar Achille Mbembe calls ‘necropower’ in the postcolonial African context. Furthermore, I assert that Bekolo’s use of these speculative figures offers new models of black female resistance as the film’s female protagonists struggle to realize a future based on community and equality. To show the necessity of situating the film within a uniquely postcolonial African context, I begin this chapter with an analysis of Achille Mbembe’s concept of the postcolony and, by extension, his theorizations of

*commandement*, necropolitics, and deathscapes. While Mbembe's analytical frameworks of the postcolony and necropolitics call attention to the rampant corruption and violence found in many postcolonial African states, Bekolo's vision offers feminine forms of resistance to these oppressive structures. Ultimately, I conclude that the otherworldly powers Bekolo provides his female characters effectively destabilize oppressive socio-political and gender-based boundaries and offers women the power to create a new postcolonial African state.

The concluding chapter of my dissertation, "Toward Global Black Female Futures," argues for the importance of reading black speculative and science fiction as an exercise in black women's forms of theorizing. I begin with an anecdotal discussion of how negative stereotypes about Africa continue to influence global perceptions of black women. I then highlight how the issues of ecological abuse, postcolonialism, and diasporic community building are addressed through the speculative to theorize about black women's futures. As these futuristic representations expand their reach through increasingly globalized forms of data sharing, one hopes that popular perceptions about black spaces and Africana people can be rebooted, so to speak.

The works discussed in this study are diverse in their representations of black women in the future, in terms of both content and medium. The issues that continually surface address explorations of power in relation to black women's bodies – especially the complicated relationship of diasporic identity; epistemological shifts that take place in the wake of climate change; and the gendered politics rooted in postcolonial African nation-states. Postcolonial histories, the politics of migration, and ecological abuse are the contexts that allow authors and filmmakers to find entry into fantastical worlds here on Earth, in alternate dimensions, and across the galaxy. The archetypal figures that take shape in these works – zombies, vampires, cyborgs,

anthropomorphic creatures, and superheroines – all contribute to the destabilization of norms and social constructs that frequently limit the types of subject positions available to black women.

### **Conclusion**

As my dissertation will show, there are important conversations happening concerning black women's role in their local societies as well as the wider global community. Futurist works by black writers, theorists, and filmmakers, I suggest, create new forms of diasporic communities which lead to increased opportunities for collaboration and transcultural understanding. As speculative imagery becomes more prevalent in global popular culture, images of the future force us to consider what our collective world will look like in the present and beyond. This dissertation, I hope, offers some insight into the current transnational conversation on how global diasporic community building comes into conversation with new imaginative forms of representation for black women.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORIZING BLACK WOMEN'S FUTURES

In this project, I examine how black authors and filmmakers are currently using aspects of the speculative and science fiction genres to explore the experiences of black women around the world. More specifically, I look at how these writers, artists and filmmakers use archetypal imagery and tropes to theorize about black women's futures. Although science fiction has historically gained a reputation for privileging the white male gaze, many aspects of this genre offer ample space to radically reimagine gender and race relations. Through figures like the cyborg, vampire, zombie, superhero, and an entity I call the anthropomorphoid, I examine how black authors and filmmakers conceptualize new forms of black female discourse.

Speculative and science fiction are valuable genres for black writers and filmmakers because the mechanics of each genre operate on the level of both aesthetic forms of world building and language. Two textual aspects that define speculative and science fiction are the structure and/or narrative devices and themes/approaches. In relation to structure and narrative devices, speculative and science fiction offer authors and filmmakers narrative devices that are unavailable in other genres. For instance, in "About 5,750 Words," African American author, Samuel Delaney, explores how literary language is vital to thinking about the structural foundation upon which the genre is built. Literary scholar Joshua Yu Burnett offers a compelling reading of Delaney's concept of literary language, arguing that speculative and science fiction stands apart from mainstream fiction. Delaney coins the phrase "winged dog," which, while in itself could be used in any literary genre, can only represent a metaphor in the realist genre. As Burnett points out, however, within speculative and science fiction a winged dog can be read as both real and/or metaphorical ("The Great Change and the Great Book" 137). Delaney explains:

One must momentarily consider, as one makes that visual correction, an entire track of evolution: whether the dog has forelegs or not. The visual correction must include modification of breastbone and musculature if the wings are to be functional, as well as a whole slew of other factors from hollow bones to heart rate; or if we subsequently learn as the series of words goes on that grafting was the cause, there are all the implications (to consider) of a technology capable of such an operation. All of this information hovers about and between those two words. (12-13)

For Delaney, the phrase ‘winged dog’ requires conditions that extend beyond the winged dog itself. As Burnett points out, Delaney’s concept of literary language “is not merely descriptive but also functions as a form of world building” (137). Several structures and narrative devices have been identified in traditional science and speculative literary criticism, such as estrangement, wholesale critiques of normative systems/perspectives, and potential ramifications for implementing new sets of norms in real and/or imagined spaces. Spatial and temporal displacement also figure prominently in these genres, with narrative styles that mirror narrators’ physical, emotional, and/or mental state. Imaginative narrative styles provide a space in which to reimagine the ordering of our present world.

### **Speculations on Race and Gender**

What exactly makes black authors, writers, and artists turn to fantastic narrative styles to imagine not only social and political change but also new formulations of identity? Popular culture’s fascination with the fantastic and futuristic is rooted deeply in the particularities of the genre that both stabilize and disorient us as readers. This tension between the “known” and “unknown” foregrounds imaginative narratives and creates a reading process based on dislocation and estrangement. More specifically, dislocation and estrangement are created by

placing the familiar into strange territory. For example, even when readers are unfamiliar with a ‘new’ planet, culture or language in a work of speculative or science fiction, the socio-political context built into the narrative speak to contemporary issues. In his 1972 essay “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre,” Darko Suvin defines science fiction as “literature of cognitive estrangement” (372). While estrangement is integral to effective world building, the narrative must also allow audiences to intimately identify with the protagonists and their world. Thus, a common thread throughout science fiction links the “cognitive estrangement” Suvin describes to various forms of storytelling. Storytelling – whether myth, legend, spiritual/creation narrative, etc. – are all important tools for shaping identities. As in other types of fiction, the ‘real’ aspects of fantastic narratives enable audiences to orient themselves within the narrative.

Historically, the science fiction genre in particular has also been complicit in conceptualizing themes of colonialism and social orders in racist and sexist ways. However, beginning with the New Wave in the 1960’s, Western science fiction texts and criticism has shifted from a predominantly white, male, heterosexual perspective into a diverse corpus of works that challenge hegemonic social norms. This shift coincided with postcolonial and feminist interventions in the academy, which proliferated gradually into popular culture. Authors like Samuel Delaney, Octavia Butler, Brian Aldiss, Ursula Le Guin, and Philip K. Dick transformed the genre by using narrative experimentation influenced by the postmodern literary movement trending at the time. As the genre broadened so too did the diversity of perspectives on science fiction’s form and function.

In 1973, science fiction author and critic Joanna Russ delivered a scathing race-focused critique of mainstream science fiction coming out of the United States and Great Britain. Russ’ use of the term “Intergalactic Suburbia” highlighted intersecting issues like racism, classism, and

sexism, which she claimed were reinforced by many science fiction narratives of the time. In *The Image of Women in Science Fiction*, Russ argues that racial, gendered and class-based structures reinforce “white, middle-class suburbia. Mummy and Daddy may live inside a huge amoeba and Daddy’s job may be to test psychedelic drugs or cultivate yeast-vats, but the world inside their heads is the world of [suburban] Westport and Rahway and that world is never questioned” (81). The influence of race-based and gendered critiques expanded the genre’s focus and reach. Social criticism – specifically focused on race and class – helped the genre develop and progress as a space for diverse forms of theorizing.

In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000), Carl Howard Freedman emphasizes “structural affinities” between multiple discourses instead of simply grating critical theory onto science fiction narratives (xix). Gendered perspectives – various forms of female-focused discourses, in particular – are useful for examining the political and social implications of the genre. Donna Haraway, a prominent scholar in the field of science and technology studies who is most widely recognized for her work on the intersection between science and feminism, has been lauded as one of the first critics to emphasize feminist science fiction as a form of feminist theorizing. Prior to Haraway’s seminal essays entitled “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985) and “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988), women’s science fiction had been primarily conceptualized as a reflection of feminist politics - albeit the white, heterosexual version of ‘Feminism.’ Science fiction and contemporary cultural studies scholar, Scott Bukatman, comments that feminist discourse and SF are synchronous: “Given a thematics profoundly engaged with social structures and sexual difference and potentially heterotopic discursive practices, the relevance of sf to a feminist

politics should not be mysterious” (21). Here Bukatman calls attention to the fact that science fiction - in both its form and function - is invested in the destabilizing of assumedly ‘naturalized’ subject positions like gender.

Feminist science fiction in the 1960’s and 1970’s explored feminist resistance to women’s oppression primarily through the reversal of gender roles (i.e. matriarchal societies) and separatist societies (i.e. lesbian utopias). In the late 1970’s, female science fiction authors began to challenge the ideological separation between the “soft” and “hard” sciences by calling attention to how foundational epistemological dichotomies distinguish the hard sciences (i.e. technology, Western medicine, mathematics) as masculine, rational, and progressive while soft sciences (i.e. homeopathy, holistic medicine, midwifery) were problematically linked to the feminine, irrational, and subjective. This trend extended to writers of color, who hybridized the science fiction genre to reclaim the significance of alternative sciences and practices typically linked to Afro-Caribbean traditions. As the trend developed, the use of traditional knowledges like Santeria, Vodou, and various West African belief systems were used by writers of color to bring Afrocentric perspectives into conversation with contemporary issues of globalization and technological advancement. At the same time, women writers of color began to reclaim and re-envision negative stereotypes surrounding the figures of witch, healer, and shaman from a female perspective.

Black women’s increased use of speculative and science fiction has proven to be crucial for both the development of the subgenre of Afrofuturism and for theorizing, particularly within academic communities. Even though direct connections exist between black women’s theories of difference and female-authored works by women of color, the question of who can produce theoretical models remains problematic. In her seminal essay “The Race for Theory” (1988),

Barbara Christian discusses how Western epistemologies often alienate the needs of women of color. The core of her argument supports an idea of black literary culture as intersecting with theory production, which involves a process of mediation between writer, reader, and critic. As she explains, the production of academic/philosophical thought as a foundation for literary theory has resulted in non-academic forms of theorizing to be ‘minoritized.’ For Christian, the distinction between a core or “central” academic voice and a “margin” made up of voices who occupy “minority” or peripheral positions in respect to Western culture is a central issue surrounding who is allowed to theorize about human experience and who cannot (77). The application of Western theoretical models to black literary forms, Christian claims, neglects to consider how theoretical-literary expression by writers of color “is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (68). Thus, for Christian, theoretical frameworks are born out of literary imagination and creation rather than from the hegemonic Western power structure of academic knowledge production.

As I mention in my introduction, I am interested in aspects of speculative and science fiction in relation to these genres’ use as a medium through which black writers and filmmakers are currently exploring the types of representation available for black women. My dissertation points to how gender and race are being re-conceptualized transnationally in ways that create new diasporic communities. Using archetypal figures and narrative tropes typically linked to speculative and science fiction, many black writers and filmmakers are radically re-imagining issues of difference, globalization, and identity that increasingly affect women’s lives around the world. Furthermore, these literary and filmic works examine contested boundaries, definitions of bodies, and socio-cultural territories. The distant planets, futuristic time frames, and forms of

techno-science used in these works allow authors to explore power relations in different ways from the realist genre. Indeed, within these imaginative worlds societies, cultures, and even languages can be built, deconstructed, and reworked.

Juliana Makichi Nfah-Abbenyi's *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (2011) supplements Barbara Christian's argument and provides insight on how African women writers use their fictional works to theorize. Nfah-Abbenyi positions herself, through her personal and educational history, as a "Bebe, Cameroonian, African, 'Third World' cum post-colonial woman-as-subject" whose goal is to create a dialogue whereby African women can become a crucial part of the production of theory (x). She stresses the importance of "lived experiences" in shaping women's writing and claims that feminism should not be viewed as an import from the West. Rather, it is a concept through which "African women writers have reclaimed and reaffirmed the anteriority of an African feminism, one that their maternal ancestors have relied on for millennia" (15).

Nfah-Abbenyi contends that "indigenous" theory is embedded in fictional texts and calls for a separation of gender from sex roles to create "unique spheres, spaces, and locations" for women's identities (24). She also addresses topics that are rarely addressed in African women's writing: female circumcision, violence against women, and lesbian African women. She warns that African women's sexuality should not be reduced to a single issue: "Fixed identity must ... be de-stabilized. This disruption creates simultaneous margins where sexual difference or gender inequalities will find themselves in potentially fluid, though still problematized, shifting locations" (33). Moreover, in her attempt to find "indigenous theories" in contemporary African women's texts, she reads texts as both representations of oral traditions and as fictionalized

theory/theorized fiction, which leads her to view feminist gender theories as embedded in texts (20).

Drawing from Christian's analysis on theory production and Nfah-Abbenyi's perspective, I argue that creative explorations of cultural anxieties often involve theory production through intersecting relations between author, reader, and text. The cross-pollination between theory, politics, and imaginative world building create a space for innovative and radical theoretical models. My dissertation is informed by Nfah-Abbenyi's and Christian's assertions that unique forms of literary expression in black women's writing can and should be read as theoretical. Locating black women's theories of differences in cultural texts contests the separation of cognitive realms, such as creativity and abstract thought, on which the Western-defined concept of theorizing rests. It moves discourses away from a hierarchical framework of theory building and toward more fluid and interdisciplinary approaches to black female thought.

### **Why Black Female Futures?**

The fantastic creatures and distant planets frequently found in works of speculative and science fiction can be used as the imaginative grounds for black women's forms of critical thought. These texts create a link between cultural imagination and political positions: they function as case studies of how theories 'work.' For many audiences, reading black women's imaginative texts serves as an introduction to their perspectives and offers concrete manifestations of contemporary theoretical debates. Within speculative narratives, viewers and readers encounter metaphors and figures such as the superhero, alien, cyborg, and various hybrids that provide disorienting images for familiar identities and concepts. Moreover, these metaphors, figures, and concepts are used to explore implications of theories within a narrative framework. Using alien or 'unrealistic' imagery can provide empowering metaphors for the

theories we rely on to explain our everyday social realities. Speculative texts and films can therefore foster new and more intimate understandings of these authors' and filmmakers' theories, their limits and their appropriation by dominant culture.

To this end, I examine a selection of works that use aspects typically found in speculative and science fiction to explore intersections between race and gender in popular, academic, and political arenas. The texts and films I discuss are best defined as transnational. Moreover, many of the authors, artists, and filmmakers are diasporic, having traveled and lived in various parts of Africa, the Caribbean, America, Canada, and the UK. The literary and cinematic explorations I examine offer theoretical interventions that complicate and extend aspects of contemporary black female thought. In my critical readings, I take an interdisciplinary approach to political and theoretical concepts by combining analyses of transnational literature and film. For instance, given the intersecting cultural and national identities of the authors and filmmakers I draw from, many of the works I examine deal with migration, rootedness, and the transgression of boundaries. Forms of diasporic community building are therefore an integral aspect of how speculative and science fiction is used by black authors and filmmakers.

Throughout this dissertation, I explore how speculative works by black writers and filmmakers disrupts national boundaries in the aftermath – or continuation – of colonialism, and how black women's bodies remain contested territory in existing social orders. The dissertation situates my focal texts and films in conversation with debates and concepts in three areas of postcolonial and black women's theories of difference: issues of migration and diaspora, ecology, and the relationship between postcolonial nation building and women's bodies. My critical readings in each chapter examine how black writers and filmmakers use aspects of

speculative and science fiction to expand current postcolonial theories and black female discourse.

Key elements that shape these debates include exploitative class and gender relations within the postcolonial African state (i.e. postcolonial and neocolonial power structures, women's role in framing nationalist discourse); the impact of climate change and ecological abuse on women's lives globally; and the transgression of national boundaries (i.e. immigration, diaspora, increases in refugee and displaced populations). From the intersections of the discourses exploring these issues emerge archetypal figures and their cyborgian, vampiric, zombified, anthropomorphic, and superhuman bodies. These characters reflect the tension between Western concepts of subjectivity and the destabilizing of cultural and ideological boundaries.

The decentered bodies that evolve and adapt to new environments and populate my selected works are plagued by ambivalence. While the imagery used by these authors and filmmakers is troubling, their characters also hold the potential for empowering examples of resistance. Like women's theories of representation, the female characters I discuss are used to explore new subject positions and theoretical frameworks. As semiotic tools, these fictive bodies foreground issues of representation and cultural meaning that are drawn from a wide range of interdisciplinary locations, including economics, politics, history, art, science, etc. Protagonists' bodies thus become metaphorical representations of black women's subject formation. As they are represented in the works discussed here, these metaphorical representations function in at least two conflicting ways: first, they constitute elements of political power and resistance; and second, they embody the contradictions and potentials of black women's theories of difference.

## **Black Women's Theories of Difference and the Speculative**

Within the long project of black female theory production, world building and women's identity formation happens not only through formalized theory and philosophy, but also through storytelling. Black women's theory, as a corpus, has traditionally pushed boundaries in an effort to be transgressive, destabilizing, and risky. This is primarily because black females thought is an emancipatory project, not just an academic one. As an emancipatory project, black women's discourse has taken many forms from its nascent stages in the 1970's to the present. Of course, I would be remiss to not foreground Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) as formative to the creation of black feminism as a 'formalized' field. As a collection of articles by multiple self-proclaimed 'black feminist' thinkers, *Black Feminist Thought* encourages readers to consider the multiple, intersecting ways black women's lives and bodies are framed, controlled, and policed.

Collins maintains her own unique perspective while also synthesizing the ideas of Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, and the Combahee River Collective, in order to provide four important lenses through which black feminist scholars view black women's experiences in the U.S. By highlighting the importance of standpoint, interlocking systems of oppression, controlling images, and the formation of a black feminist epistemology, Collins defines black feminist thought as consisting of "specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (22).

Careful to delineate that not all African American women align themselves with this epistemology and that other groups of black women do in fact play a role in its production,

Collins creates an inclusive space where black women can deconstruct their identities as both black and female in American society. As black women are impacted by both gender and race, black feminism provides an epistemological framework within which to both theorize and create new forms of emancipatory praxis. Rather than simply name the structures that control and repress black women in their daily lives, black feminism is meant to label and destabilize various systems of oppression that impede black women's ability to thrive in American society.

While black feminism clearly delineates that black women are different from other women, it has historically run into issues concerning discourses of Othering and marginalization. Scholars on black feminism like Ann duCille have discussed this issue extensively. In her essay, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood," duCille asserts that "Within and around the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principle signifier... Why are black women always already Other?" (591-592). duCille's essay addresses her discomfort with non-black female academics' figuring of black women's bodies as inherently different or other primarily because, in their minds, the black female body represents the quintessential subjugated body. In other words, within dominant discourse, black women's bodies are largely understood to illustrate utter marginalization.

The appropriation of black women's bodies for this purpose helps scholars move from theoretical discussions about the body to more practical applications. For black feminist theorists, their projects are typically concerned with rooting this figurative, marginalized, and Othered body out of the space of theory and into real, lived experience. The emancipatory potential of black feminist thought thus lies in giving 'a face to a name' to humanize and validate black women's unique experiences. Moreover, the linguistic position of being perceived as 'Other' has very real consequences beyond the theoretical and philosophical level. For instance,

it means that those who study the subject position of black women feel that they can talk about or for black women. The project of black feminism is in many ways an effort to reassert the importance of black women's voices across a variety of spaces.

Black women's theories of difference seek affirmative forms of expression that validate and affirm black women's heterogeneous identities. One of the most potent discussions on this topic concerns diaspora and its multifaceted meanings in relation to understanding blackness. There are many epistemological assumptions associated with the term as it has been conceptualized within North American discourse – particularly within academic circles. Considering the rapid increase in black African women migrants to America, Canada, and various parts of Europe, and their descendants' claims to hybridized identities, new frameworks for understanding blackness are needed.

The experiences of black identity formation among younger women in the West are particularly excluded by frameworks of migration, slavery, and blackness. Epistemologies linked to the Middle Passage, for instance, are problematic for understanding present trends in black identity formation, particularly because privileging the Middle Passage denotes a process of gendered racialization that assumes either African American or Black Nationalist (male) subjects. Thus, analytic frameworks that consider black women's migratory, gendered, and racial identities are needed in our current moment. Given that certain descriptors (ethnicity, color, gender, nationality, etc.) tend to be privileged over others, heterogeneity is key to creating a concept of diaspora that permits a myriad of origins that highlights the differences within black communities.

In *Black Women, Writing, and Identity* (2002), Carole Boyce Davies, explores how black women's subjectivities are constructed through literary and cultural texts. The primary objective

of her study concerns how black female writers “re-negotiate questions of identity” and imagine new forms of community (3). This re-negotiation of identities, Davies asserts, is fundamental to both concepts of migration more broadly and black women’s identity construction in particular because it echoes many of the same issues black women deal with in their respective societies. Per Davies, black women’s literature mirrors the “migratory subjectivity” that many displaced women develop and in turn, many black female writers create narrative devices to make sense of displaced lives. For Davies, the various forms and styles black women write in are crucial for understanding how they maneuver through issues of migration and colonial displacement: “It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates the terms of Black women’s experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities” (3).

Davies’ concept of migratory subjectivities should not be understood as exclusive only to certain populations of black women. Instead, she insists on a collective cultural identity of black women under the category of “migratory subjectivity” that resists the exclusion of the Other:

Black women’s writing... should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of “Black Women’s Writing” redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality. (*Black Women* 4)

Here Davies points out that black women are constantly negotiating changing geographies. The transgression of “boundary crossing” performed through the act of writing is what allows black women to redefine “identity away from exclusion and marginality” (4). By positioning the goal of black women’s writing as an exercise in escaping displacement, Davies demonstrates the role marginalization plays in constructing black female subjectivities. Davies also uses the idea of

transgressive speech to imagine new politicizations of selfhood. For her, identity is rooted in the notion of fluid selves rather than a singular fixed self. Furthermore, these multiple, fluid selves are situated in location-specific knowledges. Primarily committed to materialist conceptions of identity, Davies consistently returns to questions of repression through capitalism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism, which all connect to systematic forms of gender-based exploitation.

The idea of “fluid selves” as a foundation for black women’s subjectivity is echoed by many other scholars, such as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson. For Henderson, black women’s subjectivity is best conceptualized through a simultaneity of discourses. For her, looking at the intersecting and overlapping discourses used by black women writers addresses the position of “speaking both to and from the position of other(s)” (*Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora* 146). Debates on connections between marginalization and black women’s subjectivity thus address the complex ways in which black women are positioned in relation to race, nationality, class, and sexuality. The multiple categories of identity become apparent within postcolonial and anticolonial theories that explore subject formation in relation to cultural hybridity and diaspora. These categories heavily influence postcolonial theories of subjectivity, like Gayatri Spivak’s seminal question on subaltern speech and Chela Sandoval’s theory of oppositional consciousness. A central tenant of postcolonial theoretical debates, racial difference is treated two main ways: as a given that precedes power structures (i.e. as a noun) and as a process that is continually in flux (i.e. as a verb).

Science and speculative fiction engages with these debates from both a postcolonial and black female perspective. Its narrative imaginings of subjectivity troubles fixed notions of identity (core epistemologies of Truth, the notion of a self/I) and difference (the not-I/other, the

“unreal”). A great deal of speculative works created by black women critically examines the repercussions of these two concepts of difference and thereby contributes to destabilizing difference as Other. By using imaginative narrative schemes, black women writers can imagine difference as a part of the self rather than an opposite component of identity. Aspects of science and speculative fiction also allows writers, artists, and filmmakers to flesh out how boundaries can be transgressed and dissolved in favor of identities that transcend nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

The texts and films analyzed in my dissertation are in dialogue with black women’s theories that view identity as a continuous negotiation of experiences rather than as a final product. This perspective embraces differences as variable and shifting components of subjectivity and plays with various models of subjectivity. Theories of migratory subjects (Carole Boyce Davies) and African feminisms (Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi) speak to how geographical and socio-political estrangement relate to identity formation. Models of cyborg identities (Donna Haraway) – and its adaptation by Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s film, *Les Saignantes*, for instance – addresses location-specific tensions concerning the postcolonial state in relation to black women’s bodies. The concept of “necropolitics” (Achille Mbembe) and its relation to black subjectivity theorizes new ways of conceptualizing the human. In these theories, the construction of social categories based on race/ethnicity and gender play a central role in problems of global power relations, nationalism, identity politics, sexuality, and agency in general. These negotiations resonate in narrative and filmic works and the ‘alien’ female bodies that inhabit them. Through archetypal images and metaphors, the core works I discuss challenge and reinvent the terms on which discourse relies.

## **What Does a Global Black Female Future Look Like?**

Born in 1947, African American author Octavia E. Butler was raised in Pasadena, California, by her mother and grandmother. Given the experiences of the women in her life, Butler learned from an early age about the invisibility and economic vulnerability of black women. An avid book lover as a child, she learned to love science and speculative fiction and began writing at age ten. In “Octavia Butler’s Black Female Fiction” (1982), Butler notes:

When I began to read science fiction, I was disappointed at how little . . . creativity and freedom was used to portray the many racial, ethnic, and class variations. Also, I could not help noticing how few significant woman characters there were in science fiction. Fortunately, all this has been changing over the past few years. I intend my writing to contribute to the change. (Foster 38)

Having published over twelve books in the twenty-five years since the above interview, Butler has rightly received notable acclaim as one of ‘the’ major African American speculative fiction novelists of our time. In her narratives, she depicts complex societies in which aliens force-breed with humans, shapeshifters exist, and telepathic abilities are the norm. Butler’s narratives are compelling primarily because of the ambivalence that juxtaposes difference with slavery and colonialism. Her method of storytelling is female-focused, with strong black female characters who, according to literary critic Ruth Salvaggio, must negotiate the space between “enslavement and freedom, control and corruption, survival and adjustment” (“Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine” 6). Butler’s writing calls attention to central issues facing black women’s theories of difference, like resisting forms of oppression that reinforce racism, sexism, and classism.

Two primary themes that run throughout Butler's narratives are colonial experiences and the notion of difference. When these themes are used within her novels, Butler prioritizes the negotiation of identities rather than socially constructed subjectivities. By doing so, she challenges colonial discourses where the colonizer is positioned as superior 'self' while the colonized/native as framed as inferior/other. While there are countless examples of agency and empowerment in her novels – especially in *Kindred* (1979) and in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987, 1988, 1989) – ambivalence is also an integral part of characters' subject formation. This is equally true of the texts and films I analyze in this dissertation.

These works also relate to socio-cultural norms, histories, localities and geographical intersections in ways that are distinctly transnational and diasporic. For instance, while Nnedi Okorafor admits that science fiction should be adapted to an African context to appeal to local audiences, she calls attention to how stories set in a speculative framework can discuss the lived realities of African men and women. She notes that her story, "Spider the Artist" – a title drawn from West African folklore – focuses less on how spider-shaped A.I. robots break free of human control and more on the main female protagonist's life as an abused wife living on the volatile Niger Delta. This character's frustration about being barren in a region where barrenness is taboo and her character's subsequent need for intimacy leads her to befriend a robot. Within this narrative, the speculative elements of the story interconnect with the lived realities of everyday African women. Rather than operating out of as anxiety over near or far-future autonomous A.I., stories like Okorafor's use tropes derived from aspects of science and speculative fiction to offer spaces of companionship and freedom in societies that control African women's quality of life.

It is also important to note that many images and metaphors used by black writers and filmmakers are not generated in a vacuum or directly from the Western literary tradition. Instead,

they are drawn from long-standing Pan-African traditions. In the same blog post on Africa and science fiction, Okorafor notes that her young adult (YA) novel, *Akata Witch* (2011), includes entities known as “tungwa” in Nigeria, which are described as glowing balls of flesh that float in the air and explode into tufts of hair and handfuls of teeth. Okorafor mentions that her Nigerian father described these entities as similar to meteors from outer space that used to land in villages and forests in his community. Here Okorafor calls attention to the role socio-cultural and spiritual beliefs play in framing her narratives. In order to relate to global audiences, Okorafor notes that speculative stories must “deliberately combine the concept of ‘art as a tool for social commentary and change’ and entertainment. The root of the technology, cultural shifts, sentiments, concerns, characters, way of speaking, needs that drive the story must first and foremost be endemically African. Along with the unfamiliar, must come the familiar” (“Is Africa Ready for Science Fiction?” 2009). Okorafor’s comments here connect back to the basic structure of speculative and science fiction I mention earlier in this chapter – to balance feelings of estrangement and otherness with familiarity so as to create a space for social critique.

In her blog post “African Science Fiction is Still Alien,” Okorafor delves deeper into the role speculation plays in global black identity formation. For her, speculative and futuristic storytelling is integral to shifting socio-cultural perceptions about the role the continent plays in influencing global economic, epistemic, and socio-political shifts. In response to the apparent lack of African futurist authors, she notes: “this leads to two troublesome facts: 1. Africans are absent from the creative process of global imagining that advances technology through stories. 2. Africans are not yet capitalizing on this literary tool which is practically made to redress political and social issues” (2009). Thankfully, since Okorafor’s post multiple edited anthologies, short stories, films, art, and novels have been created by Pan-African men and women (i.e. *AfroSF*:

*Science Fiction by African Writers* in 2012, Haitian-born Ibi Zoboi's short story, "The Farming of the Gods," Kenyan-born Wanuri Kahiu's short film, *Pumzi*, in 2009, and Kenyan-born Wangechi Mutu's myriad art installations, and the 2017 runway collection of South African fashion designer Ntando Ngwenya, among others).

### **Why the Cyborg, Zombie, Vampire, Superhero, and Anthropomorphoid?**

The archetypal figures of the superhero, cyborg, vampire, zombie, and anthropomorphoid function as tools through which black writers and filmmakers are currently exploring contemporary global socio-economic shifts - particularly in relation to gender. In each of my body chapters, I explore how these figures allow authors and filmmakers to theorize black female futures that transgress, transcend, and destabilize the current ordering of our present world. In Chapter 2, entitled "Gendered Ecologies: Wangechi Mutu, Ibi Zoboi, and Anthropomorphism," I illustrate how Zoboi and Mutu focus predominantly on the imagery of land, and metaphorically map this imagery onto black women's bodies. These stories also explore humankind's relationship to the earth insofar as humans play a significant role in creating and maintaining responsible ecological practices due to a heightened recognition of their dependency on the natural environment. Humankind's interconnectedness with the environment feeds directly into various theoretical and activist-related concepts. While many eco-focused theories neglect to consider the layers of racial, sexual, and class-based oppression faced by many women of color, an idea of gendered ecologies prioritizes race, gender, and environmentalism.

The concept of gendered ecologies interconnects with Zoboi's and Mutu's use of the SF genre through a figure I call the anthropomorphoid. I assert that this figure allows Zoboi and Mutu to theorize about the effects of globalized ecological abuse on black women around the

world. As an archetypal figure oriented within the unknowable ‘weird’ space between speculation and scientific fact, the anthropomorphoid acts as a lens through which the crisis of global ecological systems and black women’s subjectivities can be explored.

In Chapter 3, entitled “Diasporic Superheroines in Nnedi Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*,” I ask how black female writers use superheroines to work through salient issues concerning black women’s types of identity formation. More specifically, I argue that Okorafor and Hopkinson use their fictional superheroines as epistemological tools through which to better understand the gendered, ethnic/racial, and nation-based differences between black diasporic communities, especially those that have come about due to migrations from Africa and the Caribbean. I argue the special “powers” used by Okorafor’s and Hopkinson’s superheroines call attention to evolving forms of black identity formation among women in North America and Canada. By mixing various language patterns, combining Western landscapes with Afro-Caribbean socio-cultural norms, and assigning multiple identities – in some cases an amalgamation of the human, inhuman, animal, ecological, and supernatural – to their superheroines, the authors use speculative themes to navigate the messy and oft-times undefinable nature of diaspora. In these novels, speculative frameworks and settings provide characters with tools to reimagine their diasporic identities in new and complex ways.

In Chapter 4, entitled “Cyborgs, Zombies, and Vampires: The Gendered Politics of Dystopia in Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Les Saignantes*,” I argue that in his film, *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo uses the cyborg, zombie, and vampire archetypes to illustrate forms of gendered resistance within the African postcolony. I begin this chapter with an analysis of Achille Mbembe’s concept of the postcolony and, by extension, his theorizations of *commandement*,

necropolitics, and deathscapes. I argue that Bekolo's framing of his female protagonists as vampiric and cyborgian offers a unique perspective on modes of feminine resistance within the African postcolony. My discussion of the zombie trope in the film comes into conversation with Mbembe's concept of "mutual zombification" – specifically in relation to how men are represented in the African postcolony. While Mbembe's analytical frameworks of the postcolony and necropolitics call attention to the various forms of corruption that currently plague many postcolonial African states, Bekolo's vision offers feminine forms of resistance to these oppressive structures. Ultimately, I conclude that Bekolo comes into conversation with Mbembe and imagines potential ways we can begin to create new semantics that privilege women's role in shaping a new postcolonial Africa.

### **Conclusion**

From the intersections of discourses exploring black women's futures emerge speculative characters and their cyborgian, vampiric, zombified, anthropomorphic, and superhuman bodies. They reflect the tension between Eurocentric concepts of subjectivity, the destabilizing of cultural, and ideological boundaries (i.e. nature/culture, male/female, human/non-human). The decentered bodies that evolve and adapt to new environments and populate my primary works are plagued by ambivalence. While the imagery used by these authors and filmmakers is troubling, their characters also hold the potential for empowering examples of resistance. Like black women's theories of representation, the female characters I discuss are used to explore new subject positions and theoretical frameworks. As semiotic tools, these fictional characters foreground issues of representation and cultural meaning that are drawn from a wide range of interdisciplinary locations, including critical theory, economics, politics, history, art, science, etc. Protagonists' bodies thus become symbols of the ambivalent relationship black women have in

relation to forms of political power. Moreover, protagonists' unique subject positions highlight the contradictions and potentials of black women's theories of difference. Ultimately, my reading of figures like the cyborg, vampire, zombie, superhero, and anthropomorphoid is intended to examine how black authors and filmmakers use speculative imagery to create new global black female discourses.

**CHAPTER III**  
**GENDERED ECOLOGIES: WANGECHI MUTU, IBI ZOBOI, AND**  
**ANTHROPOMORPHISM**

Much of black speculative thought has come to encapsulate aesthetic works of black cultural production that treat futurist themes concerning Africa in relation to its diaspora. However, little emphasis has been placed on how this ever-evolving genre interconnects gender and ecology. In this chapter, I examine how Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's provocative digital film installation, *The End of eating Everything* (2013), and Haitian-American author Ibi Zoboi's short story, "The Farming of the Gods" (2010), imagine black women's futures through a careful examination of ecological images, symbols, and narratives – specifically through a figure I call the anthropomorphoid.

My argument is twofold: first, I take my cue from Mutu's assertion that imaginative forms of world-building necessarily connect systemic corruption to consumptive practices. Second, I claim that these works use geographical spaces marked by ecological abuse (poisonous spores, pustules, desert landscapes), displacement (discarded objects, displaced populations/refugees) and violence (human limbs, eugenics) to negotiate the symbolic and material "marking" of black female bodies. Ultimately, I demonstrate how both texts open up new ways of imagining and understanding how black women's subjectivity and ecology come into conversation within a transnational context.

My decision to analyze these two works stems from the lack of scholarship on Mutu and Zoboi despite their notable contributions to black speculative thought as well as black women's art in general. While Mutu is more widely recognized in popular culture as an up-and-coming artist and filmmaker from East Africa, Zoboi – a Haitian-American author – is rarely mentioned

in scholarship or popular culture. Despite her lack of renown, Zobi's perspective is unique in the sense that she interweaves the post-apocalyptic with the historic. For instance, in a blog post, Zobi mentions that her short story, "The Farming of the Gods," was a response to the earthquake that devastated Haiti on January 12, 2010. Similarly, Mutu has described her work as responding to various ecological disasters and humankind's general disrespect for the preservation of the planet.

In her numerous interviews Kenyan filmmaker, Wanuri Kahiu, has also discussed how her films interconnect with ecology and the notion of a post-apocalyptic or science fiction world by claiming that Afrocentric perspectives have always used speculation and science to critique societal ills. In an interview with Oulimata Gueye held during the exhibition "Si ce monde vous déplaît," Wanuri Kahiu asserts that she was told by her director to label her 2009 short film, *Pumzi*, as either science fiction or fantasy since Western audiences separate the genres. While Kahiu ultimately decided to tell – and sell – her story as 'science fiction,' the experience prompted her to argue that

I think science fiction has been a genre in Africa that has been used a lot for a long period of time – way before I was even born...If we think of science fiction as something that is fictitiously science or speculative fiction within a story then we've always used it.

Because we've used Botany; we've used Etymology; the idea of the study of animals to tell stories or the idea of insects to tell stories or the idea of natural sciences using trees – that's all science fiction. ("Africa and Science Fiction: Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* 2009" 2013)

Kahiu's argument leads to additional questions concerning the relevance of black futurist or speculative thought as a purely futuristic or forward-thinking concept. Her focus on the

interconnections between the science fiction genre and ecology – specifically the significance of ecological imagery within African stories – also demonstrates how black speculative works reinvent nature-based symbols and narratives. In fact, Kahiū’s comments highlight that the primary aim of black futurism is not only to project black bodies and subjectivities into “futuristic” geographies but also to reimagine and work through historical memory. Intermingling temporalities like present, past, and future not only deconstructs strict Eurocentric epistemological readings of time in respect to both Africa and blackness, but also provides a more nuanced interpretation of black futurism.

In *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011), Jessica Langer usefully frames the tension between Western scientific discourse’s reliance on ideas of technological and cultural ‘progress’ and culturally-specific modes of knowledge production (9). This tension, which Langer rightly argues is at the heart of postcolonial criticism, is also integral to the black speculative thought. She explains this tension thus:

Works of postcolonial speculative fiction function above all as vehement denials of the colonial claim that indigenous, colonized and postcolonial scientific literacies exist in the past and have no place in the future. They are not the ways of strangers, but of essential participants in traditional, diasporic and world communities. Their traditions and ways of knowing are relevant, applicable, necessary. They belong to the past, but also to the present, and to the future. (152)

Within Langer’s framing of postcolonial speculative fiction, imaginative stories rework existing epistemologies that metaphorically and materially displace black bodies. Furthermore, these stories create a space for black writers, artists, and filmmakers to participate in the production and re-envisioning of history in its past, present, and future manifestations. Within the context of

my focal works, Mutu's and Zoboi's stories interweave influences from the "Afro" world that complicate a fixed, Eurocentric idea of "futurism."

These stories also explore humankind's relationship to the earth insofar as humans play a significant role in creating and maintaining responsible ecological practices due to a heightened recognition of their dependency on the natural environment. Within the context of both texts, humankind's interconnectedness with the environment feeds directly into various theoretical and activist-related concepts. As discussed below, while many eco-focused theories neglect to consider the layers of racial, sexual, and class-based oppression faced by many women of color, an idea of gendered ecologies prioritizes the intersection between race, gender, and environmentalism.

To fully analyze the interconnections between gender and ecology in this chapter, I contextualize the debate surrounding specific corollaries of ecocriticism – between ecofeminism and ecowomanism, respectively. While ecowomanism is most widely recognized as stemming from Afrocentric thought and black feminism in general, many women of color choose to self-identify as environmentalists and/or activists rather than align themselves with ecofeminism. To preface why I employ the term gendered ecologies rather than an established scholarly term, it is useful to provide a brief overview of ecofeminism and its discontents. This preface offers insight into why both of my focal works are read both within and outside of a scholarly theoretical frame.

### **Ecofeminism and its Discontents**

In "The Nature of Race: Discourses of Racial Difference in Ecofeminism," Noel Sturgeon defines ecofeminism as "a contemporary political movement operating on the theory that the ideologies which authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the

ideologies which sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” (260). As a third-wave feminist movement, ecofeminism has historically included race as a key marker of which environments will be targeted for destructive corporate practices. At its root, ecofeminism’s foundation examines how the subordination, exploitation, and appropriation of women – especially the treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in the Global North and South – interconnects with the treatment of the natural world. Ecofeminism’s goal is to refashion new discourses of care, responsibility, and justice that reveal new ways of understanding how humanity – and women in particular – is positioned in relation to nature. In contrast to academic approaches, global activist movements such as the Chipko Movement – a forest conservation movement in India that began in 1973 – have given way to more critical race-based approaches on the intersection between gender and ecology.

While scholarship remains sparse on ecofeminism’s more diverse counterpart, ecowomanism, scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether (2004), Barbara Boswell (2011), and Melanie Harris (2016) add a transnational black female perspective to the debate on ecofeminism’s essentialist undertones. African women’s activism in environmental issues also plays a significant part in creating what scholars like Barbara Boswell refer to as “African ecofeminism.” For instance, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement has been championed by scholars like Janet Muthuki as a model for re-conceptualizing ecofeminism from an African perspective by building “an alliance between women and nature in asserting the political agency of both” (12).

In fact, Muthuki considers Maathai’s Green Belt Movement as African ecofeminist activism due to the ways in which the movement works through environmental issues, highlights gender relations, and challenges patriarchal structures. The concept of an African ecofeminist

activism also interconnects with the idea of ecowomanism, which is grounded in Alice Walker's concept of womanism. Per Melanie Harris, ecowomanism "centers on the perspectives of women of African descent and reflects upon these women's activist methods, religious practices, and theories on how to engage earth justice" (2016 5). An ecowomanist approach is unique in that it links social justice with earth justice by recognizing the overlapping and intersecting modes of oppression at work between both women of color – specifically black women – and the environment.

It is also a useful term for conceptualizing paradoxical and problematic connections between black women and the earth. According to Harris: "In addition to honoring the beautiful connection that black women have with the earth, as the earth (earthlings) and as shared creators, black women have a particular historical experience of suffering with and as the earth" (6). Harris' reference to black women's experiences of "suffering with and as the earth" relates specifically to the transnational histories of colonialism and slavery where black women's bodies were raped, sold, and objectified for profit. Harris' reading of the "beautiful connection" between black women's bodies and the earth could be read as romanticizing epistemologies that link black female femininity to primitive earth-based knowledges. However, many narratives by women of color – including the two I discuss in this chapter – use an ambivalent tone to discuss the positive and problematic connections between black women's bodies and the environment. This ambivalence signifies that female characters' bodies can play a positive role in repopulating and rebuilding natural environments while at the same time suffering physical and epistemic violence from outside forces.

My primary texts include depictions of the future that actively recycle and work through the past in ways that open up new ways of imagining and understanding ecology and gender.

More specifically, their stories of ‘girls in the future’ who inhabit magical and post-apocalyptic worlds draw from earth-focused images, symbols, and narratives that speak to trauma associated with (re)membering the colonial past in both its symbolic and material manifestations.

Ecological imagery holds significance in reading these filmic and literary texts as well. From the sacred Nigerian grove of Osun-Osogbo to earth-based *loa* found in Vodou belief systems, ecological imagery is used to frame black women’s subjectivities in a global context. For instance, Kenyan filmmaker, Wanuri Kahiu, has described her works like *Pumzi* as a call for human beings to “mother” the earth rather than deplete its natural resources for profit (“Africa and Science Fiction”). This idea finds numerous dysfunctional echoes in the two focal works examined in this chapter. Both works include representations of how consumptive practices and the abuse of natural environments disrupt mothering practices.

In my close readings, I explore formulations of ‘other worlds’ and the types of relational structures that can be built between material forms (i.e. human, animal, plant, etc.). Both works effectively theorize unique gendered ecologies through a figure I call the anthropomorphoid. As it is used in my focal works, the anthropomorphoid directs us away from mainstream eco-feminist and eco-womanist arguments and towards transgressive imagery that privileges black female subjectivity, challenges (dis)connections between human and non-human entities, and conceptualizes alternative framings of ecology. This reformulation of ecology is explored through alternative framings that disrupt its reliance on Eurocentric notions of the human.

### **Contextualizing the Anthropomorphoid: Definition and Use**

I contend that the anthropomorphoid allows Zoboi and Mutu to theorize about the effects of globalized ecological abuse on black women. To begin, I define the anthropomorphoid and situate it within both works. I then demonstrate how this figure’s ambiguity – as a being oriented

within the unknowable, ‘weird’ space between speculation and scientific fact – acts as a lens through which the crisis of global ecological systems and black women’s subjectivities can be explored. I assert that it is through the anthropomorphoid that black speculative writers and artists like Zoboi and Mutu address intersections between eco-feminist critiques and the concept of the human to imagine potential black women’s futures.

The anthropomorphoid as a topic of study has not received treatment in literary or filmic scholarly circles, despite the prevalence of anthropomorphic entities in speculative and science fiction and film (i.e. *The Abyss* (1989), *Event Horizon* (1997), *The Thing* (1982), *Sphere* (1987), *Leviathan* (1989), *Hyperion* (1989), etc.). I read the anthropomorphoid as an entity or being constructed in relation to anthropomorphism – the human tendency to attribute human personalities, traits, and emotions of non-human entities. However, the anthropomorphoid also embodies and reflects the fears, anxieties, and pressures associated with humanness. In short, this metaphorical figure is best read as an abstract representation of the human psyche.

The term itself is made up of three syllables which indicate its significance as a narrative tool of critique. ‘Anthro,’ derived from the Greek word, *anthropos*, meaning human, is a prefix that indicates a study of the human, humanoid or human-like, especially in relation to sentience. The term ‘morph,’ per the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means “to change the form or character of” as well as “to undergo transformation” – specifically in relation to the transformation of one object into another. The third syllable of the word ‘anthropomorphoid’ – ‘oid’ – makes sense only in relation to the prefix upon which it is grafted since it indicates resemblance to a form or object. Thus, ‘anthropomorphoid’ can be read as something that has the capacity to shift, transform and change in and out of human or human-like form. The form of the entity – that which structures its being or ‘self,’ if you will – while intimately connected to humanness, is not

completely human. It is the space between the human and humanoid/inhuman qualities of the anthropomorphoid that makes it such a malleable and potent figure. As a paradoxical figure that embodies both the human and inhuman, the subject and the object as well as the content and the form of any given thing, the anthropomorphoid can be used to critique a wide variety of socially constructed themes, such as identity, context, location, gender, race/ethnicity, and even humanness itself.

In “On Seeing Human: A Three-factor Theory of Anthropomorphism,” Nicholas Epley, Adam Waytz, and John Cacioppo argue that humans are likely to anthropomorphize when they are motivated to be effective social agents or desire social contact and affiliation. This tendency can be used or even exploited for a variety of purposes, such as promoting scientific exploits, improving a brand's marketing strategy, or environmental protectionism. Within literature and film, the tendency to anthropomorphize can also signal existential anxieties or fears. From this perspective, parallels can be drawn to the emotional response of humans to robots or artificial intelligence (AI). The existence of artificial but human-like entities is a common theme in speculative and science fiction works, and typically relates to existential fears about the concept of human identity. As human-like entities with a form of sentience, the figure of the robot challenges humans' notions of ‘specialness’ and triggers defenses, which are typically represented as eliciting existential anxiety.

In folklore, the creation of human-like, but soulless beings is often represented as dangerous to humankind, as with the golem in Judaism, whose absence of human empathy and spirit can lead to disaster and death. To a large extent, anthropomorphism is understood as a tool that leads us back to ourselves, much in the same way as T.S. Eliot discussed the human impulse to explore: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to

arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (*Little Gidding*). In other words, the impulse to search outside of ourselves for answers leads us only one place – back to the self. According to Eliot, it is in this moment of having returned to the self that we will understand it best. Anthropomorphism operates in much the same way – by projecting ourselves outward onto human-like subjects/beings/entities/forms, we can more fully understand what it means to be human.

While anthropomorphism can be used in a wide variety of mediums and genres, I am most interested in exploring its usage as a tool of critique. In his newly-released book, *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction* (2017), Brian Willems positions his discussion of anthropomorphism in relation to speculative realism, a genre that indicates a shift “away from academic fixation on the infinite subtleties of human cognition, and into a larger speculative cosmos” (vii). While science fiction tends to portray a universe “that is an imaginative fabrication of the author,” speculative realism is rooted in philosophical inquiry and as such “is duty-bound to speak about the world as it is” (vii). Philosophical in its purpose, its application in narratives “tends to uphold a reality that is significantly more bizarre than that accepted by everyday common sense” (vii). In other words, speculative realism interrogates the construction of ‘reality’ by disabling and deconstructing the very framework on which our concept of reality rests. For Willems, anthropomorphism features prominently as a tool of disablement and deconstruction of reality building within narratives. Moreover, according to Willems, the prevalence of anthropomorphism within speculative and science fiction is symptomatic of a larger anxiety – humans’ fear of widespread ecological collapse.

In his introduction, Willems outlines important questions concerning the connections between ecological abuse and anthropomorphism:

The real monsters are not aliens from outer space but humans on Earth. Nuclear radiation poisoning, environmental catastrophes and genetic manipulation gone wrong are only some of the ways that science fiction horrors are being realized. Yet if humans have become the new monsters, what happens when their dominance is removed? Are there other organizations of knowledge, time and space which could lead to a better future than the one now being created? (1)

Here Willems positions ecological concerns as the framework on which contemporary imaginative worlds are built. In our current moment of rapid climate change, widespread natural disasters, and unprecedented scientific discovery, the line between fiction and reality is beginning to blur. Similarly, anxiety within popular consciousness about “the unknown” is quickly being replaced by a horrific reality – our planet is headed for collapse. Most importantly, it is humans who have set this chain of events into motion. Willems goes on to argue: “A human-centered approach to the environment is leading to ecological collapse. When non-human things are taken to be equally as valid objects of investigation as humans, a more responsible and truthful view of the world can take place” (1). Here Willems advocates for a focus on “non-human things” as a method of re-evaluating the connections between humanness and environmental issues. From this perspective, it is through evaluating the qualities and characteristics of non-human things that we can discover our flaws as a species and rectify them in time to create a better future. As a paradoxical human and non-human thing/being/entity/form, narrative representations of the anthropomorphoid stand in as metaphorical signifiers for humans’ existential angst about our role in destroying the planet.

The anthropomorphoid exists in ambiguity – an ambiguity rooted in the unknowable ‘weird’ space between speculation and scientific fact. When deployed in speculative works, the

anthropomorphoid is built using human or ‘knowable’ elements as a base framework over which non-human or ‘unknowable’ things are grafted. This method of deployment effectively destabilizes readers’ perceptions of not only the real, but also of humanness. Within the context of humans’ fear of ecological collapse, the form(s) in which the anthropomorphoid manifests are often through the most frightening destruction of everything humanity holds dear. As I discuss in my close readings, this destruction of everything humanity holds dear is framed as an opening for new forms of life - particularly for black women.

I contend that the use of the anthropomorphoid provides a useful way for thinking around current framings of ecofeminism that sometimes unknowingly reinforce fixed distinctions between blackness, gender, ecology, and human subjectivity. Rather than obeying a strict hierarchy between human and non-human, anthropomorphoids occupy a liminal space that both intersects and exceeds current iterations of black female subjectivity as it is expressed in environmental discourse. Moreover, the figure of the anthropomorphoid offers a framework through which to imagine new modes of human subjectivity and speculate about black women’s global futures.

### **Mutu’s Anthropomorphic Future**

Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything* illustrates a stark critique of how black women’s bodies interconnect with the environment – particularly in reference to consumptive practices. In this film installation, we see an imaginative mutation of humanity and the construction of new ecologies. In the 2014 exhibition entitled *Earth Matters* located at the National Museum of African Art in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based Wangechi Mutu was featured to speak on nature and her connection to land. Her opening statement – “The people that I hail from are crop cultivators and landowners. We’re

farmer people” – intersects with the fact that many of her works deal directly with land, the earth, and ecology in general (Milbourne 91). Moreover, the intersection between land and black women’s subjectivity is a consistent theme in her works. Mutu’s use of the anthropomorphoid figure highlights specific elements of her unique perspective on the intersection between gender and ecology that inform what types of black women’s futures she envisions for black women collectively.

*The End of eating Everything* was commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and completed in 2013 as a collaboration between the artist and female African-American singer/songwriter, Santigold. As Trevor Schoonmaker has noted in his essay, “A Fantastic Journey,” both Mutu and Santigold use their art to “dismantle, cut, and paste materials to create eclectic, polyphonic, multicultural mash-ups...as well as those of the planet and outer space” (46). Her first stint with animated video, Mutu brings her trademark pastiche-like collages to life in order to create a narrative that functions as a critique of race, gender, consumption, and environmental abuse.

Mutu’s collaboration with Santigold also calls attention to the digital short as a transnational work. As a product intended specifically for academic and art-savvy audiences, the film should be read within the context of its modes of distribution and reception. While transnational in nature, the film is hardly meant for a wide, popular audience due to its limited release and availability. Unavailable in its complete version online, *The End of eating Everything* can only be viewed in its entirety at specific art installations, which change locations depending on timeframe and artist availability. Thus, while this work can be read as transnational, its limited release and accessibility imply that it is not meant for widespread consumption. Rather, this film should be read as intended for a narrow academic audience. While the film contains an

overt socio-political message, this work should be read in relation to the mode of circulation and distribution.

The tone of the digital film installation is dark, melancholic, and grotesque yet also fantastical and distinctively post-apocalyptic. A faint, eerie wind-like sound acts as score and soundtrack for the installation, and colors are muted. As the film opens, viewers are introduced to the central character – a tumorous creature with Medusa-like hair that floats in what appears to be a grey sky. Its head, which resembles Santigold, is attached to a massive body-like mass made up of discarded machinery, severed limbs, infected spores, and flailing tentacles. The only other organisms in the film are a flock of black birds that swarm around the creature's head. As the birds fly around her head, the creature sniffs the air predatorily, soon after voraciously biting into the flock to consume as many birds as possible.

With blood and birds scattering across the frame, the creature grows until it eventually implodes in circles of smoke. As the fog lifts, so too does the mood as the sky lightens and the creature explodes into hatchlings of small squid-like creatures with Santigold's talking head. Ultimately, these smaller, more brightly colored entities are spawned by the consumptive singular entity. Within the context of the film's diegesis, these creatures can be read as a form of life that represents hope and rebirth. Given the installation's content and title – *The End of eating Everything* – Mutu seems hopeful about the prospect of working through humankind's abuse of the planet.

Mutu's decision to use a black female body as a metaphorical marker for environmental abuse requires careful examination. In one sense the amorphous singular creature appears powerful and attractive as Santigold's face is beautifully accentuated with strong eye makeup and her skin appears radiant. However, her body is bloated and diseased. This paradoxical

imagery calls attention to how multilayered histories of colonialism, slavery, and neoliberalism have exploited and dismembered black women's bodies. Moreover, by making the creature's body appear like a landmass, she invites a parallel reading between black female bodies and the earth.

In "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," Chelsea M. Frazier argues that Mutu "articulate(s) social and political ecologies that move beyond the limited correctives made available through the standards and conventions of Western formal politics" (40). Mutu openly uses her art as a critique of socio-cultural stigmas surrounding black women and their bodies; however, she also prioritizes the connection all humans share as a species to protect one another as well as the planet. As she states in an interview with Schoonmaker, "There is this connection – this deep connection – that we all share because we all come from the same place" (2013 46). This relationship, however, is far from symbiotic. In fact, much of Mutu's work plays with the idea of dichotomies and power relationships – male/female, white/black, Africa/Europe, human/animal, hand/machine – in ways that challenge what we perceive as real and/or imagined. According to her,

I have different themes, and I mash them all together. One of the things that I'm focused on is finding new ways to interpret the female portrait by questioning those qualities we look for when we identify something as 'woman,' or even 'beautiful.' What do those words mean? And how are they particular to, and part of, different histories? We sort of assume that we are saying the same things and so run the risk of ignoring, of negating, the existence of people when we homogenize them. (102)

In *The End of eating Everything*, Mutu does indeed “mash” a variety of themes together in paradoxical ways (for example, many of her images are both grotesque and beautiful, haunting but also hopeful). Additionally, she makes the inanimate animate by splicing the humanness of Santingold’s face onto an earth-like landmass. It is this mashing together of gendered and ecological imagery that grounds Mutu’s anthropomorphoid as a tool of socio-cultural and political critique.

Mutu’s use of imagery in this short film destabilizes racial markers. A significant reason why her critique of race, gender, and ecological abuse works so well is due to her layering of unfamiliar symbols and images on top of recognizable ones. Returning again to Darko Suvin’s commentary on cognitive estrangement, it is through this destabilizing process that Mutu creates her unique version of the anthropomorphoid. Though the trunk and lower limbs are replaced by an amorphous mass, other characterizations of the anthropomorphoid invite comparisons to known or assumed representations of black femininity. For example, the creature’s hair, while Medusa-like, is braided in a way that signals black identity. The use of Santingold’s face also invites a reading of African American pop culture in relation to black women’s subjectivity. However, Mutu’s removal of any additional markers of African American identity beyond the inclusion of Santingold’s head indicates the potential for a reading of global or transnational black female subjectivity. Indeed, the creature’s position within a polluted and unrecognizable environment disorients the reader from determining any noticeable geographical markers that would situate the creature’s racial identity within a specific location.

Mutu’s protagonist/anthropomorphoid unsettles viewers’ attempts to classify its ethnicity and gender. It also asks viewers to question markers of humanity, land, consumption, global capitalist practices, and other forms of materiality as well. Shifts and developments in

environmentalist discourse have theorized about the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, etc. For instance, theorists like Timothy Morton have considered ecological thinking beyond rigid conceptions of the term ‘nature’ (*The Ecological Thought* 2012). Morton’s form of ecological thinking connects with earlier theorizations of the human and post-human – most notably Donna Haraway’s cyborgian vision in her seminal book, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). However, misleading assumptions about the relationship between nature and the environment have also led to misreadings of women’s bodies – particularly black women’s bodies. Mutu’s work asks us to assess the limitations of hierarchies that privilege one form of life over another based on social markers like race, gender, class, etc.

The limitations of these hierarchies are explored via the anthropomorphoid as a gendered ecological figure. The ambiguity of what ‘makes up’ the form of Mutu’s anthropomorphoid invites viewers to question classifications like black, female, plant/seed, animal, etc. More specifically, Mutu uses her anthropomorphoid to shift our focus away from classifications and social constructions. It is within this space of critique that we most clearly see how Mutu positions her anthropomorphoid as a gendered ecology. While marked with specific racial and gendered markers, Mutu’s anthropomorphoid is neither plant nor animal, human nor in-human. Instead, this figure can be read as a gendered ecology, which serves as a metaphor for global capitalist consumption and its effect on black women’s bodies. The title of the film, *The End of eating Everything*, is telling for thinking through her critique of globalized consumptive practices. Alternatively, her imagery can also be read as a critique of consumptive practices within spaces that are inhabited and shaped by various forms of transnational blackness. Mutu has repeatedly expressed her frustration with stereotypical and pessimistic representations of the

continent, and her training in visual arts and anthropology provide her with the tools to address these frustrations in her work.

Like much of Mutu's art, the political nature of *The End of eating Everything* is both subtle and overt. The variety of themes she deconstructs in her works come together through the fantastical, the surreal, and the speculative. One might call her a diasporic African ecowomanist; however, this label would hardly do her or her work justice. While academics tend to focus on labeling – and in a sense homogenizing – the work of others to make it more accessible and pliable for theoretical models, artists like Mutu play with genre and imagery in ways that defy definition. More specifically, to refer to her as 'Afrofuturist' or 'ecowomanist' distracts from the ways in which her 'futuristic' images speak to how ecological imagery in her works critiques Eurocentric notions of humanness. Here I return to my reading of works like Mutu's as representing gendered ecologies primarily because the content and form of art like *The End of eating Everything* speak to a wide variety of popular and scholarly issues that rarely fit neatly within theoretical models. If nothing else, Mutu's work addresses how science fiction, art, literature, and film can interconnect in unexpected ways.

### **Gendered Anthropomorphoids and Haitian Futures**

In his reading of Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* (1995), literary critic Adam Johns argues that the relationship between environmentalism and bodily change in black speculative works can be built on adaptive forms of community and world building. In his discussion of the novel's protagonist, Lauren, and her mutating, amorphous companion called "Earthseed," Johns argues:

Change isn't merely powerful. It is ceaseless. We cannot be fixed, even if we are limited. Because we cannot be static, we can have at least some influence on the direction of

change. To change our environment is to change our body, or the bodies of our descendants. Changing the environmental can, in some cases, even lead to genetic changes...A dystopian environment gives rise to genetic mutations, one of which appears to be maladaptive, but turns out to be adaptive...The highly adaptive mutation helps, in turn, to establish a new environment, rich (although hardly saturated) with utopian possibilities. (“The Time Had Come” 40)

Johns’ comments demonstrate how mixing the human with the non-human, when positioned within a speculative framework, offers possibilities for re-conceptualizing human subjectivity. For Butler, her protagonist’s Earthseed represents an amalgamation between human and non-human in a way that changes both human characters’ bodies as well as the environments in which they exist. Like Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, Ibi Zoboi’s short story, “The Farming of the Gods,” reframes human subjectivity through the anthropomorphoid. Moreover, like Mutu’s creature, Zoboi’s anthropomorphoid foregrounds gendered ecologies as a tool of socio-cultural and political critique in black speculative works.

In “The Farming of the Gods,” the anthropomorphic being Zoboi creates offers a radical model of ecological ethics that troubles conceptions of eco-feminism and eco-womanism. Using futurism, Zoboi outlines a plausible scenario of near-future ecological catastrophe in the Caribbean – Haiti specifically – and tells a story of an attempt to come to terms with this reality. Zoboi’s human protagonists, Marisol and Inno (short for Innocent), are marked as socially marginalized, young, impoverished, and black/Haitian living in a dystopian Haiti that has been ravaged by the effects of climate change and catastrophic ecological abuse. By focusing on the experiences of impoverished, Haitian refugees living in largely – though not exclusively –

black/Haitian communities, Zoboï emphasizes the relationship between social justice and environmental degradation.

While Zoboï's work has been largely overlooked in both academic and popular literary circles, her work has found a home in collections on black speculative thought – specifically in an anthology entitled *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (2013). Like Mutu's artistic style, Zoboï's writing is both straightforward and disorienting, apocalyptic yet also familiar. The scorched and decayed landscape of a future Haiti – the central setting in her short story – serves as a physical representation of the terrifying world her protagonists struggle against physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Narrated in first person, the story's narrator, Inno, is a Haitian living in an unspecified time period in a post-apocalyptic, desolate Haiti made up of inhabitable and habitable zones controlled by foreign scientists. Food and water are scarce, and the protagonists are described as refugees with no means of agrarian sustenance since “no food [sprouts] from the soil” (“The Farming of the Gods” 55). In a 2012 blog post, Zoboï comments that “The Farming of the Gods” was written in response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti – referred to as “Goudougoudou” by Haitians for the onomatopoeic sound the earth made that day. As she describes it, the story takes place “decades after Haiti's devastating earthquake” when “the precious land and its vital resources, the people and their ability to bear children, and their religion are all held within the hands of foreign scientists and doctors” (Zoboï 2012).

Like the scorched land, Zoboï's near-future Haitian women are also barren as the narrator divulges that no children had been born in Haiti “for twelve years” (52). Given this phenomenon, scientists – described as “foreign” by Inno – experiment with a lava-like substance from deep within the Earth's core to impregnate the story's main female protagonist and Inno's wife, Marisol, to repopulate the country. While Marisol does conceive, her “babies” are far from

human. Instead, they are deformed, amorphous beings with multiple limbs that are conceptualized as “seeds” that provide nourishment to the charred land.

While Zoboï’s depiction of Haiti looks post-apocalyptic, it is best described as a world that Rob Nixon would characterize as afflicted by “slow violence” – a term used to discuss forms of gradual environmental and social violence that disproportionately affects poor and marginalized populations particularly in the Global South (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* 2013). In the story, the gap between dispossessed and powerful has widened to the point where the bodies of the marginalized become guinea pigs for scientists. In Zoboï’s Haiti, there are no pockets of stability or reprieve from starvation and extreme weather events.

It is only through the “foreigner’s science” that “makes food grow and wombs fertile again” that the story’s protagonists imagine a hopeful future (“The Farming of the Gods” 52). Inno narrates,

For days we walked. Almost a hundred of us at first. Not even in my grandmother’s time did they walk this far. She would travel by ferry or a small plane to get from her village near Jeremie Port-au-Prince. But here and now, a mere promise of food and a future was enough to make us pack our only one most coveted possession and trade in the rest for a good pair of tennis shoes, clean water, and a small packet of dry salted meat...Visas to leave the country were a myth, so immigration was an excursion into the gated interior of the island where planes landed with important people and expensive equipment; where this secret of theirs born out of our Vodou was contained...There would be land and quality food, [the] doctor had told us. Armed men had escorted [Marisol] to the curtained entryway of our bungalow from a huge truck. I hid my filthy, soil-caked hands from her.

We had just buried four neighbors withered to just skin and bones. Marisol was courteous, even offering the doctor a tin of our previous clean water. The doctor handed Marisol a plastic bottle of clear liquid instead. Maybe this had been the payment the man had spoken of. (51)

Displacement, starvation, and death run rampant and goods and services that should be provided by doctors and healthcare professionals – services that are viewed in the West as basic human necessities, like water – have become currency. Perhaps the most jarring aspect of Zoboï’s ‘post-apocalyptic’ Haiti is its similarities in aesthetics and economic disparities found in current-day Haiti. The imagery she uses closely echoes Sylvia Wynters’ description of the “sharply unequal distribution of the earth’s resources” (“Unsettling the Coloniality of Being” 261). Wynter’s assertion calls attention to the fact that presently there are communities in Haiti and across the Caribbean in desperate conditions. It is the legacy of colonialism that has produced the forms of abject poverty that Inno describes.

The story contains overt and extended allusions to the history of colonial violence inflicted upon Haiti and its population. While oriented in a near-future landscape, repeated references to colonialism and its use of eugenics via the story’s doctor characters capture the various forms of inequality that began with colonialism and are exacerbated by global capitalism in our present historical moment. In *Paradise Lost: Haiti’s Tumultuous Journey from Pearl of the Caribbean to Third World Hot Spot* (2010), historian Philippe Girard examines how colonialism and slavery have left Haiti with a legacy of racial tension, both within the country and internationally. One of the primary issues Girard explores is Haitians’ discomfort with white foreigners’ motives and assumptions surrounding Haitians’ supposed inability to govern themselves. Despite having grown up in the Caribbean, Girard explains that he “was strikingly

unprepared” for the level of impoverishment found in Haiti. His description of a 2001 visit to the country might have come straight out of a dystopian novel:

Some crossroads had traffic lights, but it took me three weeks before I saw one function. The potholes were so deep many reached the sewers five feet below. They were filled with garbage that no one picked up; homeless orphans filled plastic bottles with the trickle of water making its way through the waste...Downtown streets were choked full with vendors, pedestrians, the SUVs of well-connected businessmen with windows shut tight, the overloaded *tap taps* (shared taxis) and *publiques* (public buses) that serve as public transportation, and antediluvian trucks spewing black smoke that mixed with the acrid smell of burning garbage. (1)

The level of refuse and dilapidation in Girard’s description of Haiti illustrates how this story might not be meant to merely consider Haiti’s future but its present as well. As the only Caribbean country to have successfully defeated colonial invaders and won its freedom in a slave revolt, Haiti occupies a unique position in the Western imaginary. Put bluntly, the West has never forgiven Haiti for its violent refusal of colonial authority. Through her narrator, Zoboï explores a near-future scenario in which the West continues to exploit Haiti’s dire situation through ecological and scientific exploitation.

Like in Mutu’s *The End of eating Everything*, women’s relationship to land has both real and imagined elements. One of the ways in which human bodies – specifically women’s bodies – are linked to the earth is through the notion of physical contact with soil. Innocent recalls a memory of his mother “crouched down over the ground...digging with her bare hands the remains of her two children” (“The Farming of the Gods” 54). This movement is echoed by Marisol when she is preparing to be initiated by Ayizan-Freda, a Vodou deity, as Haiti’s first

mother in over twelve years. The generational connection between these two women is intensified by their connection to the land in respect to both death and rebirth. However, the interconnections between death, rebirth, and ecology in relation to black women's bodies are problematized in this story through Zoboï's anthropomorphoid.

In this story, the anthropomorphoid creates unsettling parallels between nature and the human body. Indeed, the imagery of Inno's mother burying her children in the ground is juxtaposed with Marisol's conception through an earth-based magical substance. When Marisol gives birth to three amorphous "babies" or "seedlings" with multiple limbs, those once buried can be read as reborn. However, rather than rebuilding humanity, these seedlings instead rebuild the natural ecosystem. For example, Marisol's most prized baby, Mango, refuses to latch onto Marisol's breasts for nourishment and instead "only wanted to feed on dirt" (59). Once Innocent "put Mango down on the ground...he would roll his little deformed and discolored body" and then "something would sprout from that very spot" a few moments later (59). Here the anthropomorphoid represents the pairing between black women's bodies and ecology. Mango and 'its' siblings can thus be read as a gendered ecological critique of environmental abuse and its effect on black women's lives around the world.

Within the context of the narrative, the exploitation of black female bodies through experimental reproductive practices by foreign scientists has significant historical echoes. Moreover, the fact that Haiti is chosen as a setting for this tale also echoes the centuries of abuse and exploitation by the West of the country's population and ecological resources. Zoboï calls attention to this reality in her story through her use of faceless and exploitative scientists who use Haitian women as test subjects for their experiments. Moreover, the asymmetrical power relations found in the relationship between Haiti and the West are echoed in this story. Indeed,

the author uses her scientist characters to highlight paternalistic forms of “aid” in times of crises. Forging a link between aid and enslavement, such critiques stem from the use of Haitian women’s bodies to repair ecological abuse as reproductive units that bear offspring for the benefit of Western economies.

‘Born’ out of the union between Marisol and a substance said to contain the energy of Ayizan-Freda – a Vodou *loa* associated with the earth, marketplace, and rite of initiation – Zoboï’s anthropomorphoid is described as disturbingly humanoid by the narrator. Inno consistently struggles to define the anthropomorphoid, and resorts to biological markers of human identity like gender and body parts to determine the being’s relation to humanness. While Inno remains uncomfortable with treating the being as he would a human child, other characters within the story insist on personifying the being in various ways. One of the ways in which this personification is performed takes place via the establishment of paternity. As Marisol’s husband, Inno is marked as the father of the entity. For instance, after giving birth, Marisol tells Inno that her ‘babies’ “have your eyes” (56). Similarly, the doctors present at the birth assert that Inno is “like a new Adam for the new Haitians” (56). However, Inno refuses his link to paternal responsibility based on the being’s in-human qualities and genderless form. While Inno claims that “there was no way of telling the sexes at first,” after the being he later names ‘Mango’ is deemed male by the scientists, Inno reacts viscerally to this gender naming by vomiting: “I tried my best to keep a straight face. Not since the waning days of cholera epidemic did I remember vomiting. Except for the moment I laid eyes on my ‘son,’ this doctor Weber dared to call it. Its eyes and too-many limbs were wrongly placed and its body was the color of egg yolk” (56).

In the narrative, the possibility of reproduction and the passing on of lineage is not realized in respect to traditional gender dynamics. Rather than giving birth to a male human

savior, Zoboï's decision to position her sexless, in-human anthropomorphoid character as the savior of a dystopian Haiti conceptualizes humanity as unwed to white, male, patriarchal, and imperial frameworks. It is important to note that while Mango is the central anthropomorphoid figure in the narrative, Marisol gives birth to triplets - two of whom remain ungendered. Inno's role as the narrator provides a glimpse into his structuring of human life and social ordering in relation to gender, in particular because Mango is the only anthropomorphoid described as male. His decision to fixate on Mango's gender, biological form, and function is indicative of a privileging of maleness as the key to futurity. By complicating Mango's gender, Inno is forced to reconsider what the future might look like not only outside of humanness but maleness. The relationship between the future and gender is further complicated when Mango embodies roles typically relegated to the feminine, such as the fertilization of land.

Attempts to label Mango as male are complicated by its role as a fertilizer of soil and product of a female-centered spiritual energy. While the scientists attempt to engineer beings that are closely aligned to human form, Inno notes that his anthropomorphoid 'child' more closely resembles a "seedling" rather than a human (58). Instead of acknowledging his role as a father to the anthropomorphic being birthed by his wife, Inno describes himself as a "farmer to this son of mine" (59). His decision to name the being 'Mango' also solidifies the anthropomorphoid as a being that interconnects ecology (seedling) and humanness (baby/child). Mango's differences, even as they are viewed as undesirable by Inno, prove fruitful for the well-being of Haiti in many ways. The ways in which Mango responds to and uses both its biologically determined attributes and its subject position within the larger colonialist, patriarchal and ecologically imbalanced culture demonstrate how Zoboï's futuristic Haiti remains plagued by ambivalence.

Zoboi not only uses the anthropomorphoid to critique gender, but also constructions of race/ethnicity. As the product of both a Haitian woman and entities deriving from ancient Afrocentric belief systems that were deemed illegal during the colonial period, the anthropomorphoid can be read as the visual representation of blackness as it is conceptualized in Western epistemologies – as a monstrous and inhuman form of life. In the narrative, Mango embodies markers of race/ethnicity through the way in which it is conceived as well as his biological form – particularly its eyes. While triplets Marisol gives birth to are described as ‘babies,’ they are characterized by their deformities. They emit a “bright yellow glow” that echoes the sun-like or golden color of the ectoplasmic substance, which is symbolically linked to the Vodou deity, Ayizan-Freda. In his attempts to convince Marisol that her beloved ‘babies’ are in fact aberrations of nature, Inno asserts that they have “one too many limbs and their eyes are nothing more than a hundred more eyes looking out at us. Those bodies want to be born again through you, cherie. Only three were able to make it and within those three, there are more” (58). Here the anthropomorphoids’ identities as ‘babies’ is replaced by their connection to the reincarnation of Haitians buried within the soil.

Death and the potential for reincarnated life, in this context, connects with two main issues in Haiti’s past and present - the country’s failed economy and the disastrous effects of climate change. In the narrative, Inno describes the disastrous effects of climate change in his post-crisis Haiti thus: the “hundreds of thousands of bodies fallen from the shaken city months before I was conceived were offered back to that which was responsible for their deaths, and still, the earth had reaped nothing but more death” (55). Here the earth’s barren nature is linked to its role as a taker of human life. Indeed, the imagery of fertile soil is almost always contrasted with the burying of dead bodies. Similarly, Zoboi also links this imagery to Haiti’s failed

economy: “the bedrock of our old economy has crumbled and become like fine silt tinged with the blood of the fallen ones” (55). The pervasiveness of death and potential for renewed forms of life is represented through Mango, an anthropomorphic character used to critique the relationship between black women’s bodies and ecological abuse.

By grafting Haiti’s ecological and economic history onto her figure of the anthropomorphoid, Zoboï creates a way of working through and reclaiming both the lives lost in the wake of catastrophic nature events and those affected by the global capitalist practices that facilitated the decline of Haiti’s economy. For Zoboï, the anthropomorphoid becomes a blueprint for building a new world. Her new world incorporates life forms that defy gender norms and transgress limits of human subjectivity. The story ends with a cautiously optimistic tone, as the continued production of anthropomorphic seedlings becomes the route through which humanity survives. However, the anthropomorphoid’s paradoxical role as the embodiment of both death and new life illustrates how Zoboï’s framing of black women’s futures can best be described as ambivalent.

### **Conclusion**

I read the concept of gendered ecologies and the anthropomorphoid figure in these two works as theorizing a black female future that restructures black women’s theories of difference and environmental discourse. These works demonstrate a need to reimagine not only our future but our present. As Matthew Omelsky claims, imagining a “present-as-past through the optic of the future opens up the possibility of a restructured present and shift in the normative modes of social thought. It engenders a new politics of our historical moment” (“After the End Times” 48). In other words, how do these works use the idea of gendered ecologies and the anthropomorphoid to speak to contemporary concerns facing black women around the world?

Both stories critique various forms of ecological abuse and its relationship to black women's lived realities. Moreover, through their use of an archetypal figure like the anthropomorphoid, Mutu and Zoboi engage how black women's futures are bound to re-conceptualizing ecological ethics in transnational contexts. Ultimately, these works position women as agents of change and producers of knowledge, who not only survive (apocalyptic disaster), but are instrumental to the reconstruction of the future.

## CHAPTER IV

### DIASPORIC SUPERHEROINES IN NNEDI OKORAFOR'S *THE BOOK OF PHOENIX* AND NALO HOPKINSON'S *BROWN GIRL IN THE RING*

In “Popular Arts in Africa” (1987), Karin Barber notes connections between Marvel Comic superheroes and Twi folktales in popular comics created for audiences in Accra and Kumasi during the 1970’s. In these comics, she observes, Marvel superheroes and folkloric figures are defined by unique special powers that are significant to the lives of everyday Ghanaians. Barber notes that in many cases, Marvel superheroes and storylines are adapted to fit Ghanaian ways of life as well as offer modes of political transformation during a particularly turbulent time in Ghana’s history after the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah. Much in the same way as Ghana’s hybridized and transnational Marvel/Twi superheroes, the increasing visibility of black superhero figures – or ‘Super Blacks’ as Adilifu Nama states in *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011) – from both Africa and the Diaspora has become more commonplace in our contemporary moment. In this chapter, I assert that black writers use superhero characters to provide us with imaginative ways of understanding contemporary socio-political issues – particularly in relation to epistemological formulations of diaspora.

As they are represented in the two novels I examine, Afro-superhero characters fit into the wider theoretical idea addressed throughout this dissertation – archetypal figures as tools of gendered critique. Within the context of this chapter, I extend my focus to female Afro-superheroes – or superheroines – particularly those created by black women writers. Given the ways in which Afro-superheroes are used to comment on contemporary social and political tensions, I ask how black female writers use superheroines to work through salient issues concerning black women’s types of identity formation. More specifically, I argue that these

fictional stories offer epistemological tools to better understand the gendered, ethnic/racial, and nation-based differences between black diasporic communities, especially those that have come about as a result of migrations from Africa and the Caribbean. Using Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), I contend that the special "powers" used by these novels' superheroines call attention to evolving forms of black identity formation among women in North America and Canada, respectively. In these novels, themes like genetic manipulation, cultural appropriation, hybridized spiritual practices, and generational family ties are addressed within speculative frameworks and settings to provide female characters with tools to reimagine their diasporic identities in new and complex ways.

Building on the idea that superheroes are not otherworldly but rather rooted in everyday practices, I read archetypes as a way to explore how black women's bodies are overdetermined by past and present histories. The superheroines who inhabit the worlds created by Okorafor and Hopkinson use Afro-supermodernity as a way of understanding black women's locatedness in regards to their pasts and futures. Moreover, the narrative tropes and themes addressed by Okorafor and Hopkinson demonstrate that the connections between present, future, and past are inflected with activist potential. The superheroines I discuss in this chapter are transnational, oppositional figures who connect with the everyday lives of ordinary black women around the world. In speaking to the everyday lives of black women, Okorafor and Hopkinson trace genealogies of Afrocentric folkloric figures found in various Caribbean and – in Okorafor's case, Igbo – thought worlds. As I note below, both authors situate their identities in multiple locations. While far from autobiographical, their narratives complicate fixed notions of identity as located in one specific place. These novels should be read as inherently transnational and hybrid. By mixing Pan-African language patterns, combining Western landscapes with Afro-Caribbean

socio-cultural norms, and assigning multiple identities – in some cases an amalgamation of the human, inhuman, animal, ecological and supernatural – to their superheroines, Okorafor and Hopkinson navigate the messy and oft-times undefinable nature of diaspora.

### **Migratory Subjectivities and Black Women’s Speculative Fiction**

The concept of diaspora, within the framework of black identity formation, has traditionally been epitomized by the central theme of loss and alienation. Many writers have attempted to capture the idea of loss as a legacy of black oppression beginning with *The Middle Passage* and/or *Transatlantic Slave Trade*. For example, Saidiya Hartman, a professor at Columbia University specializing in African American literature and history, focuses on how black identity in the West is frequently based on a spiritual, historical and even existential disconnection from the African continent. This loss of connection to a central place of origin is a powerful idea that shapes one core understanding of diaspora. Considering loss and alienation as a central tenant of diasporic identity, however, comes with a price. As Hartman explains:

The hope is that return could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home. (*Lose Your Mother* 100)

Here Hartman points out three main facets of diaspora within the context of black identity formation – hope, loss and return. While feelings of loss and disappointment are framed as structuring a hopeful future and the possibility of return to a form of rootedness, Hartman addresses the ambivalence surrounding diasporic identity.

Loss and disappointment are central themes of diaspora in the traditional sense, but evolving forms of diasporic identity are reimagining what hope and rootedness might look like for contemporary black communities. In “And so I Write You: Practices in Black Women’s Diaspora” (2017), Celeste Henery proposes that black women’s writing practices create new possibilities for black collectivity. In her words, “Black women’s writing practices illuminate how they shift diaspora from a concept of separation, loss and exile into one that includes desire, communion and possibility” (435). Moreover, she asserts that these writing practices capture voices heard “across time and space, through different mediums, and often without consistent physical travel or meetings. They envision a new undercurrent to more familiar framings of the black or African diaspora around exile, home, and terror” (436).

In *Physics of Blackness: Beyond Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), Michelle Wright argues for “new definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize” (5). Calling attention to contemporary forms of transnational blackness, Wright notes the “increasing proliferation of diverse Black communities of individuals whose histories and current statuses as ‘hyphenated’ Black identities across the globe” defy categorization (5). Per Wright, contemporary racial politics and discourse frequently rely on nativist, Pan-African, or Afrocentric approaches to black identity, with an idyllic ‘return’ to an originary African past figuring heavily. She explores how most discourses on black identity situated within the U.S. and the Caribbean situate collective black identity as rooted in the Middle Passage, which problematically links black cultural experience and expression to the “experience of slavery in the Americas and the struggle to achieve full human suffrage in the West” (7). However, linking blackness to the Middle Passage enacts a linear progress narrative that neglects to consider the diverse nature of global black identity. To disrupt this linear narrative, Wright argues that

blackness should be defined as “the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined - the ‘now’ through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated” (14). This reconfiguration of blackness allows for multiple intersecting markers of identity and attempts to elide forms of intraracial exclusion.

One of the more familiar framings on diasporic black identity centers around what Wright calls Middle Passage Epistemology (MPE), which is a structural framework predicated on a shared geographic beginning as well as a historical trajectory. At times, MPE is problematically deployed in ways that imply a process of gendered racialization that assumes African American or black African nationalist (male, heterosexual) subjects. For instance, in her reading of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, and W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Wright illustrates how these seminal texts have come to privilege the Middle Passage as an exclusively black, male, and diasporic body of thought. The significance of MPE within black transatlantic discourse holds significance for how identity and belonging are framed. Partly due to a reactionary movement away from essentialist Afrocentric discourses of the 1970’s, the Middle Passage has largely replaced Africa as a site of origin and identity formation in black transatlantic discourse. Thus, attempts to situate Africa in transatlantic frameworks commonly reinforce reductive genealogies of racial consciousness and identity formation. By the 1990’s, the discursive space Africa once inhabited as a mythic site of return and belonging for diasporic subjects shifted dramatically.

While Middle Passage Epistemology tends to privilege only a fraction of viewpoints espoused by black women and black populations outside of the United States, black speculative thought both rejects the linearity of MPE and acts as a tool kit through which to reinvent

established epistemologies or create new frameworks. Many of these new frameworks are created through narrative. Texts written by black women authors have been integral for creating new ways of imagining global black identity. The intersection between speculative storytelling and black women's theories of difference explores the role black women play in creating progressive futures.

Like Henery's thoughts on black women's writing practices, scholars like Mae Gwendolyn Henderson and Carol Boyce Davies have explored the role writing plays in black women's identity formation. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (2002), Davies asserts that "Black women's writing/existence...redefines identity as it re-connects and re-members, brings together black women dislocated by space and time" (3). She further argues that black women's subjectivities should be viewed as "a migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations" so that "we can see how their work, their presences traverse all geographical/national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place" (3). Here Davies positions black female subjectivity as "migratory" in a positive sense rather than framing it as evoking feelings of alienation, as in MPE. Within Davies' foregrounding, writing provides a way to transcend the epistemological, historical, and geographical "boundaries" that limit black women from discovering affirmative epistemologies rooted in self-worth and community.

Speculative works written by black authors frequently subvert discourses that perpetuate "Western image[s] of the future that [are] increasingly detached from the past or, equally problematic, a future-primitive perspective that fantasizes an uncomplicated return to an ancient culture" (Nelson 8). Given that Africa tends to serve as a stand-in for race in Western discourses, intersectional markers of ethnicity and processes of racialization are blurred under a

homogeneous idea of the ‘African.’ What futurism offers for new concepts of diaspora is a framework for deconstructing North American racial schemas relating to black identity, diaspora, and the continent. Through fictional characters, speculative narratives bare characters’ ethnic and local identities and historicizes those processes by linking them to colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, as well as voluntary and forced migration.

Migratory patterns to North America and Canada require analyses of black racial identity formations that permit intersecting and overlapping ‘origins.’ One way of examining these ‘origins’ is by deconstructing discourses of race and gender within fictional narratives. In many cases, the implied ethnic/racial background of the novels’ protagonists opens possibilities for examining the link between contemporary processes of gendered racial identity formation among Pan-African women. It is important to note that diasporic identity is an open signifier typically linked to the idea of migration, both forced and voluntary. The term ‘migrant,’ which may include a wide range of experiences and levels of citizenship, also denotes a process of racialization. As Msia Kibona Clark notes in her article, “Identity Among First and Second Generation African Immigrants in the United States” (2008), national and ethnic differences between first and second generation immigrants in North America are commonly reduced to a new homogenized racial identity (169). This “new” identity typically combines elements of their various ethnic backgrounds.

Given the ethnic and racial diversity of black communities, creating a stable and fixed concept of diasporic identity is fluid, to say the least. However, it is this fluidity of categories that allows authors to examine how signifiers of black identity move in and out of social and legal categories. Using Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* and Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I argue that the superhero figure illustrates how diasporic identity is grounded in the

convergence between multiple places and cultures. Drawing from Davies' concept of "migration" in relation to black women's writing, I propose that these novels explore the ways in which diaspora can be read as a "series of border crossings" rather than as "fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound" (Davies 3).

### **Contextualizing the Black Superhero/Superheroine**

Within the context of popular culture, superheroes have fulfilled a desire to escape from the habitual to imagine the 'what if.' Superheroes have also acted as idealized projects of our everyday selves that conceptualize the human beyond earthly constraints. But superheroes function as more than just characters of escapism and flights of fancy. They also invite readers to imagine a world in which technology, humanity, and even mortality is reimaged. My concept of the superhero is rooted in Jeph Loeb's and Tom Morris's distinction between hero and superhero outlined in their chapter "Heroes and Superheroes" in the edited collection *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way* (2010). Per Loeb and Morris, "As a rule, superheroes have powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary mortals. And to a person they pursue justice, defending the defenseless, helping those who cannot help themselves, and overcoming evil with the force of good" (11).

The term "hero," as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, stems from Greek antiquity, contains three joint yet somewhat contradictory meanings and is distinctly male-focused. The first definition, a "man of super-human qualities, favored by the gods," roots heroes' powers in external extra-human forces – "the gods." The second definition, "illustrious warrior," foregrounds another male-specific role – the warrior figure, which typically foregrounds nation-building projects. The third definition, a "man admired for achievements and noble qualities," implies that heroes must exhibit a certain moral or ethical compass. Just as the

term ‘hero’ takes on new meanings in our contemporary moment, so too does the idea of ‘superpowers.’ For instance, consider the significance of a firefighter, teacher or police officer being referred to as a ‘hero’ with superpowers or simply as a ‘superhero.’ The ability to go above and beyond assumed thresholds of patience, time-related commitments and sacrificial behavior is what constitutes a superhero in common parlance.

Although there has been some work on black superheroes, such as Richard Reynolds’ *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), Jeffrey A. Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans* (2001), and Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2003), few address the superhero trope outside of the comic book genre. In general, black superheroes have been read by literary scholars like Adilifu Nama as representing a “range of transformations and symbolic expressions that not only offer a sci-fi version of blackness but also challenge conventional notions of black racial identity while engaging the thorny topic of race and racism in America” (153). Given its roots in American culture, depictions of superhero characters in non-Western contexts is typically read as a cross-cultural appropriation of an inherently Western concept.

Within an African context, South African scholar Carli Coetzee points out that while increasing representations of Afro-hypermodernity might appear to be “evidence of the increasing infiltration of transnational consumerism into youth cultural forms in African contexts,” emergent African iterations of the superhero figure are deeply embedded in localized social contexts and political commentary (“Afro-Superheroes: Prepossessing the Future” 241). Representations of African superheroes frequently evoke the legendary exploits of powerful women and men found in Afrocentric folklore. As Duncan Omanga points out in “‘Akokhan Returns: Kenyan Newspaper Comics and the Making of an ‘African’ Superhero,” the Kenyan

superhero character, Akokhan, created by Ghanaian-Kenyan cartoonist Frank Odi was built on Kenyan Luo folklore of the legendary Lwanda Magere, whose superhuman powers made his skin impenetrable by enemy fire (67). According to Odi, many of the images used in his Akokhan comic remediated Luo folklore in a new space and time for Kenyan audiences. Rather than using phrases and images derived from Western culture, the Akokhan comic series uses the superhero figure to address uniquely West African socio-political issues. Given its wide circulation and readership across the continent, Omanga argues, the Akokhan series can be read as the quintessential African superhero comic and the Akokhan character can itself be read as “a modern-day telling of an African comic superhero” (266). The Akokhan comic series speaks to syncretic modes of understanding the tension between traditional or indigenous belief systems and contemporary postcolonial – and neocolonial – issues facing the continent.

As Omanga points out multiple times throughout his article, the African comic superhero is almost without exception a man, with female characters playing a subordinate or supportive role in stabilizing Akokhan’s mental state in order to reclaim objects of power and defeat Tonkazan. As is common in the American comic book tradition as well, female characters in comics as well as science fiction have typically been written to serve the desires of an imagined male readership, thus leading to a paucity of superhero narratives that include women as little more than objects of titillation or fetish. Within the context of the comic book genre, science fiction scholar J.A. Brown points out that since mainstream superhero comics frequently rely on idealized images of male and female physical and sexual perfection, pregnant and maternal superheroines are contextualized as abject or monstrously feminine. According to Brown, “The pregnant body is derided for its inability to respect borders, an issue that is critical to the superhero genre. Consequently, motherhood is characterized as an untenable position for

superheroines, while paternity is valorized as a means to accepting patriarchal ideas of law and order” (77). In effect, maternal superheroines conflict with the ideals of a predominantly male readership that demands consumable and sexually available female bodies. Brown’s comments also highlight how superhero figures are used to embody male fantasies of border protection and nation-building. Constructing superheroines as objects of male fantasy rather than as autonomous world-building partners interconnects with how forms of nationalist rhetoric appropriate women’s bodies. The paucity of comic narratives that employ the trope of superheroine-as-object speaks to how myth-making is only liberating insofar as diverse perspectives are represented.

I read superheroines as complicating the perspectives from which myths are created. When faced with a primarily white, male, and racist tradition of superhero narrative, black women writers are faced with giving a new face to the stereotypical ‘superhero.’ More than a face, these authors must engage in new forms of world-building based on culturally-specific and gender-specific perspectives. However, although the Afrocentric superheroines described in the novels I discuss in this chapter do “write back” against tropes employed within a largely male-dominated, Eurocentric canon, their characterization involves forms of nuance and ambiguity that make them distinctively human rather than flat, reactionary archetypes.

As materials become easier to access via digital platforms, an increase in black female readership of speculative works is steadily leading to an ever-broadening body of futurist works written by women of color. In black literature written by women, a single narrator point of view is typically used to, in the words of postcolonial scholar Uppinder Mehan, “radically shift the perspective” from which the story is told (“Teaching Postcolonial Science Fiction” 177). Moreover, narrators like the ones found in Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* are young black women living in dystopian worlds that overlap real

historical legacies of slavery, oppression, and conquest. The plotlines used by these authors also highlight how these same histories have created the foundation for Western society's technological advancements. Rather than portraying the development of 'civilization' as an act of self-actualization, these writers demonstrate how these legacies have been built on the exploitation of black bodies – specifically black women's bodies. By showing a female body of color in the future, these stories also challenge assumptions that future societies will in fact be 'colorblind' and gender neutral. Instead, their superheroines confront the same modern-day issues faced by many women of color – the silencing of their voices and appropriation of their bodies.

Examining how black women's bodies are seen, read, and appropriated is a central issue for current discourses on diasporic identity formation. It is my contention that the two novels I examine do not avoid the messiness of categories associated with diasporic identity. Rather, the ambivalence surrounding their characters' place within their native and adoptive societies helps expose the limits of frameworks like MPE or nation-based identifiers in ways that create space for expanding and reworking the concept of diaspora. Further, I examine how these authors complicate fixed notions of black female bodies by incorporating syncretic modes of knowledge that imply diverse and transnational black identities. Finally, I probe the limits of what constitutes a raced and gendered body within the diasporic context in relation to both authors' use of the superheroine figure. With these topics guiding my analysis, I now turn to my two focal novels.

### **The Ambivalent Superheroine: Diasporic Origins in *The Book of Phoenix***

Nnedi Okorafor, an award-winning Nigerian-American author of a wide variety of fiction novels and novellas like *The Shadow Speaker* (2007), *Who Fears Death* (2010), *Akata Witch*

(2011), and the *Binti* series (2015), frequently admits to using her fiction to address real-life situations. In “Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence,” she claims that “some speculative fiction may be unconcerned with realism, but mine sure as heck is deeply concerned with it” (25). Elsewhere, in a recent interview with Leif Schenstead-Harris of [WeirdFictionReview.com](http://WeirdFictionReview.com), Okorafor notes:

The theme of choice and the power of culture pops up in my stories often. Before *Binti*, the biggest example of this is in *Who Fears Death* when Onyesonwu must face the decision of whether or not to go through a ceremony that required cutting off her clitoris. To many readers, the fact that she has to think about whether or not to do this is shocking. It’s not shocking to me at all, coming from the culture that I come from where the individual is often secondary to the community. I may have been born and raised in the United States, but there are significant parts of me that are VERY Igbo (Nigerian) and I am often in conflict with these parts. This is the plight of many Nigerian Americans. And this is the root of my deep understanding about and experience of African cultures.

(2017)

Here Okorafor frames her identity as a diasporic Nigerian-American woman as conflictive. Her use of complex – and many times deeply flawed – female characters allow Okorafor to address widely-held misunderstandings about how Afro-diasporic women navigate their socio-cultural landscape. Moreover, as a diasporic writer who is intimately familiar with African cultural systems, Okorafor conveys that diasporic identity is largely a balancing act between multiple intersecting and oft-times competing transcultural modes of knowledge.

Exploring the tension in transcultural belief systems – specifically in relation to black women’s bodies – is thus an important aspect of Okorafor’s narrative style. In a sense, then,

Okorafor's primary goal is to address real-world issues faced by girls and women of color. What speculative forms of narrative make available for her is a way to complicate readers' perceptions of purportedly "backwards" cultural norms by placing these issues into unsettling or unfamiliar settings. Okorafor is also able to play with women's agency in ways that provide alternative solutions to contemporary issues (i.e. in *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu's powers allow her to regenerate her clitoris after having gone through the cutting ceremony).

The prequel to Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, *The Book of Phoenix*, balances intersecting modes of Pan-African knowledge and uses the superhero trope to critique fixed ideas of diasporic identity. Based in a post-apocalyptic world in which genetic experimentation is used to produce biological weapons for corrupt Western governments, *The Book of Phoenix* features Phoenix, a young woman described as an "accelerated organism" who, although she is only two years old, looks and feels "like a forty-year-old woman" (*The Book of Phoenix* 9). "Mixed, grown and finally birthed" on the 28th floor of Tower 7 – a secret genetics lab controlled by an organization known as the "Big Eye" – Phoenix describes herself as "a plant [grown] for the sake of harvesting" (9).

While many of Okorafor's other novels, novellas, and short stories have all been internationally recognized both in literary circles and scholarly criticism, since its release in 2015, no literary scholarship has been written on *The Book of Phoenix*. Like many of Okorafor's other works, the topics of diaspora, rootedness, and belonging feature prominently in *The Book of Phoenix*. While the idea of diaspora as a site of alienation, loss, and hopeful return that characterize the Middle Passage as an originary location from which to situated black identity weighs heavily on the novel's characters, Okorafor complicates fixed notions of diasporic identity by creating characters with complex and oft-times conflicting personality traits.

Ambivalence, rather than rootedness or belonging, influences the novel's protagonist as she struggles to determine her role in the world. Here I use the phrase 'role in the world' to highlight Phoenix's unique subjectivity as a genetically engineered, super-human, black diasporic woman. For the protagonist, her concept of 'home' influences each decision she makes. The importance of determining a point of origin necessitates a transatlantic journey that involves escaping from her Manhattan-based home/prison of Tower 7, traveling to West Africa in search of her genetic roots, and returning to the United States to both find her biological 'birth mother' and free her compatriots from the tyranny of the Big Eye.

Phoenix's connection to her fellow "speciMen" – a term used to describe all genetically altered entities in Tower 7 – serves as the primary way in which the protagonist grounds her identity. Confused and frustrated by an inability to control her rapidly evolving powers, Phoenix turns to her speciMen compatriots, almost all of which are composed of African DNA, to determine how she 'fits' in the world. In a conversation with Mmuo, a speciMen of Nigerian descent who can turn invisible and walk through walls, Phoenix comes to understand both environment and genetics as playing a role in determining her identity as a diasporic subject. Addressing Phoenix, Mmuo asserts, "You are an American, Phoenix. So though you know Africa well, you will believe in the power of science over all that we know. But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world" (116). Here Mmuo calls attention to the difficulties of synthesizing syncretic belief systems and cultural norms. To be diasporic means that one must juggle intersecting – and sometimes competing – epistemologies while acknowledging the validity of both belief systems. Within this context, racial/ethnic formation is best navigated through ambivalence since the two epistemologies are presented as mutually exclusive and are rarely reconciled in the novel.

Capable of reading “a 500-page book in two minutes,” Phoenix consumes knowledge at a rapid speed, thus allowing her to consume a wide range of information about how knowledge is structured in the world outside of Tower 7 (7). The protagonist’s ability to consume and synthesize information is a product of her genetically modified DNA, and the information she learns about spiritual belief systems influences how to interprets her own subjectivity. She states, “I read countless books on the sciences of the world. Carrying all this in my head, I understood abomination” (8). For Phoenix, traditional spiritual belief systems and modes of scientific inquiry are mutually exclusive and convergence between the two produces an abominable form of hybridized knowledge. It is through these epistemologies that Phoenix comes to understand her own mixed genetic makeup as abominable as well.

As a genetically modified individual who sees herself as an “abomination,” the protagonist’s journey to becoming a superhero diverges from the classic superhero coming of age storyline (7). Unlike traditional superheroes whose powers are the direct inheritance of a royal bloodline (i.e. Wonderwoman, Superman, Black Panther, etc), Phoenix’s powers are the result of genetic experimentation. Moreover, her genetic makeup is said to be a haphazard amalgamation of DNA strands ranging from human to animal. While her abilities, which include albatross-like wings, space-time manipulation, and the power to explode and re-materialize afford her a certain power, they come at a grave price. Flying dislocates her from humanity, manipulating space and time does not allow her to change the flow of events, and her ability to explode causes the deaths of those she loves most. For these reasons, Phoenix views herself as more closely aligned to the anti-hero or villain.

Through her depiction of Phoenix as a conflicted genetically created Afro-diasporic woman, Okorafor flips the superhero trope on its head. On the one hand, she is a “failed project,

a rogue prisoner” and “weapon” created for “nuclear warfare or biological warfare” (41). On the other hand, her abilities have positive attributes. After destroying Tower 7 using her explosive powers, the protagonist awakens to find that, like the legendary Phoenix, she has regenerated – an experience she describes as similar to being “reborn” (36). As she reorients herself, Phoenix comments that “one thing I had learned was that, despite my origins and the sinister reasons for creating me, my light had brought life. Though I burned, I was a positive force” (40).

The significance of genetic modification as a stand-in for racial/ethnic identity formation in the novel cannot be overstated. It is through genetic manipulation that Phoenix is ‘born’ and derives her extra-human powers. Moreover, the types of meaning that are produced at the intersection between her self-identification as both a speciMen (in-human/super-human) and an Afro-diasporic woman (human) speak to the ways in which histories of colonialism, slavery, and eugenics inflect Okorafor’s conception of diasporic identity formation. Indeed, I read *The Book of Phoenix* as resisting an easy amalgamation of North American racial schemas and Pan-African identities by breaking down Phoenix’s intersecting subject positions and clearly linking those to the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and voluntary and forced migration.

Positioned between hero and villain, Phoenix’s search for origins both destabilizes and reinforces the traditional superhero plotline. Okorafor’s use of first person narrative highlights the ambivalence with which diasporic identity is treated within the novel. After realizing that she can explode and regenerate, Phoenix reflects:

I had been created in Tower 7 two years ago from the DNA of an African woman possibly born in Phoenix, Arizona. Or maybe what I was was the origin of my name. Standing there watching the building fall, I took the idea further. *Maybe my DNA was brought directly from Africa and had nothing to do with Arizona.* I frowned as what I had

been seeing all my life clicked into clearer focus. So many of those created, manipulated, enhanced, deformed, crippled people with me in Tower 7 were from parts of Africa. I'd known this by looking at people but now I wondered, *Why?* (40 emphasis in original)

Within this framing, diasporic identity and the idea of 'mixed' or 'pure' DNA is positioned within a racial schema - specifically that of eugenics. Read within the histories of slavery and colonialism, the manipulation of DNA and purification of bloodlines highlights instances of scientific experimentation on black bodies. In searching for 'pure' African origins, Phoenix reproduces the anxiety found in traditional epistemologies that link diasporic identity to a sense of loss, alienation, and return.

Race, gender, and eugenics also intersect in relation to Okorafor's use of the term 'HeLa' throughout the novel, which relates to Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose cancer cells were used to engineer the revolutionary 'HeLa' cell line. In her book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), Rebecca Skloot explores how Lacks, an African American tobacco farmer and mother of five, became one of the most significant – and under recognized – individuals in scientific history. While visiting the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951 to treat excessive vaginal bleeding a large, malignant tumor was found on her cervix and she was treated with radium treatments for cervical cancer. Without her knowledge or consent, a sample of her cells were taken for study and found to be unique in their ability to replicate and survive. Today, these 'immortal' cells have been used to study a range of toxins, drugs, and viruses. The 'HeLa' cells have also led to tremendous leaps in scientific discovery and treatment, including in-vitro fertilization, gene mapping, cloning, and cancer medications.

While the story of Lacks' cells has been used as a universalizing narrative (i.e. her cells have helped all humanity), her identity as an African American woman complicates this uplifting

narrative. Not only were Lacks' cells taken without her consent, but her family remained uninformed about their importance until twenty years after her death. Moreover, her children only learned about their mother's unique cellular makeup when doctors began using them in medical research without their knowledge. Their medical records were also released to the press and published without their consent. To mitigate legal grievances, Johns Hopkins now includes a section of their website on upholding bioethical standards ("The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks"). In this section, details concerning consent and scientific research are addressed extensively - particularly in relation to legal practices concerning informed consent.

In the webpage "Upholding the Highest Bioethical Standards," Johns Hopkins asserts that it was common medical practice in the 1950's to "collect tissue samples from cervical cancer patients, regardless of race or socioeconomic status" ("The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks"). While Johns Hopkins attempts to deflect responsibility away from the ways in which institutional racism operated in Lacks's situation, in "Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa Cell Line: Rights of Patients and Responsibilities of Medical Researchers," Jessica L. Stump calls attention to the fact that care at Johns Hopkins was at that time "the only real choice for free but segregated medical care for impoverished African American patients" in Baltimore, Maryland (127). Moreover, Stump points out that while medical care was free, it was "silently conditioned upon the assumption that treatment and research would occur simultaneously" (127-128). While legal protections for biological matter did not exist in the 1950's, the significance of Lacks's cells in medical research has equated to considerable monetary value. Given that Lacks' family not only was not told about the importance of her cells nor compensated by the medical community, the ethics of scientific discovery and ownership is thus at the heart of the story surrounding HeLa's immortal cells.

In *The Book of Phoenix*, Okorafor links Phoenix's identity to both the HeLa cells as an instrument of genetic engineering, but also features HeLa as a character in the novel. Described as a "speciMen" held in "the innermost layer" of Tower 4 located in the Virgin Islands, she is an owned 'product' of LifeGen Technologies - a company owned by the Big Eye. In the narrative, HeLa's gender fluctuates between 'it' and a 'she,' which calls attention to her identity as an owned 'product' (119). When they finally meet, the connection between HeLa and Phoenix is demonstrated in terms of their physical appearance. Phoenix narrates:

She walked toward me. She stepped up to me. She was the same height as me. She wore a white dress like the ones I liked to wear. Much darker than I, she was the rich hue of crude oil. An African woman, but there was something about her that I could not put my finger on. She had large dark brown eyes. She looked about twenty years old. (130)

The similarities in their physical appearance are extended to their shared genetic structure when Phoenix directly mentions Henrietta Lacks and the scientific misuse of her cellular property:

I knew of Henrietta Lacks, a black American woman who died during Jim Crow, in 1951. Her cancer cells were harvested and used to advance science beyond the imaginable after scientists learned that those cells were immortal. For years, her family had no idea that this happened; they had no idea that though Henrietta had died, her cells lived on and on and on and on, multiplying and multiplying. Though it wasn't stated in my records, I had always been sure Henrietta's cells had been used in the research that led to my creation. (130)

The connection between eugenics, blackness, and gender are positioned here within the context of immortality. Despite centuries between the women, Henrietta Lacks, Phoenix, and HeLa all experience forms of institutionalized racism and sexism. Indeed, while the mainstream story of

Lacks' cells is framed around a universalist message - scientific research for the benefit of all humanity – Okorafor uses the mistreatment of Lacks, Phoenix and HeLa to highlight the pervasiveness of institutionalized racism ranging from the past into the future. In this context, the immortal nature of Lacks' cells can be read as a collapsing between past, present, and future instances of race and gender-based oppression.

With HeLa, Okorafor also interconnects eugenics, gender, and race with diasporic identity. While Phoenix described HeLa as 'African,' there are certain features that she cannot place. In a rushed discussion with Phoenix, HeLa reveals that while she is categorized as a speciMen, she is not the product of genetic engineering by the Big Eye: "Phoenix, they didn't make me. I was born in India. I am Jarawa, the last of my kind" (130). Departing from the story of Lacks as an African American, Okorafor marks HeLa as both African and Indian. With this added racial/ethnic marker, HeLa's character calls attention to the varied 'migratory subjectivities' women of color carry within their genetic makeup. While the Transatlantic Slave Trade has long been a historical point of departure for collective black identity formation, Okorafor's linking of Henrietta Lacks and Indian identity highlights another phenomenon of mass global enslavement - the Indian Ocean Slave Trade. Moreover, HeLa is not bioengineered, but 'born.' Racial/ethnic identity are thus complicated in the linkages between Phoenix and HeLa in terms of their ability to claim origins as both their own unique genetic 'property' as well as a shared history of oppression.

Skloot also comments on both HeLa's legacy as the first human with "immortal cells" as well as the ways in which Lacks's cells have traveled since her death (1). For instance, it was Lacks's cells that were taken up "in the first space mission to see what would happen to human cells in zero gravity" (2). Moreover, advances in science have allowed for the replication and

cloning of her cells. Indeed, the production and distribution of Lacks's cells around the world has become a business in and of itself. While HeLa's cell line is frequently referred to as 'immortal' and the 'future' of science, Henrietta Lacks - the person - is frequently overlooked while HeLa - the consumable product - is prioritized. In her introductory chapter, Skloot muses on what Lacks might think of "cells from her cervix living on forever - bought, sold packaged, and shipped by the trillions to laboratories around the world" (2).

Even after her death, Lacks and her biological matter continue to be used in the service of scientific discovery. While Lacks's cell movement via modes of distribution and production can be read in a transnational and diasporic context, it also foregrounds black women's assumed role in the global economy as readily consumable products. In *The Book of Phoenix*, the protagonist's role as an immortal genetically engineered weapon derived from HeLa's cell line critiques the philanthropic narrative typically linked to scientific discovery. Indeed, one can read Phoenix's transnational movement in relation to both a reenactment of The Middle Passage as well as a critique of the types of forced migration imposed upon all black women and what might be referred to as ownership over their biological 'property.'

When Phoenix decides to escape the only 'home' she has ever known - Tower 7 - and travel to West Africa in search of rootedness and belonging, she is forced to create new avenues of relating that bridge disparate world imaginaries. She finds ways of understanding herself and the world around her in ways that become salient and useful as she navigates the complete reorganization of her speciMen community. For Phoenix, this includes forging a new network of familial bonds and adopting a new 'homeland.' However, it soon becomes clear that Phoenix's unique biological makeup is not suited for the building of community ties but rather, for destruction. Her volatile powers become a hindrance to the possibility of community building

and a hopeful future based on a fixed and stable idea of home. Unable to overcome her genetic mutation as a biological weapon, the novel ends with Phoenix exploding in a blast so large that it causes a cataclysmic event across the entire Earth. While her time spent with other is used trying to use her abilities for positive forms of world building, she ultimately embraces her role as “terrorist” (219) and “villain” (218).

Phoenix’s decision to ‘wipe clean’ the slate of humanity comes at a price, but it also has benefits. Within this new post-human framework, there is no supposed point of origin for her to ‘return home’ to and all technologies of institutionalized racism have been destroyed. In this sense, Phoenix does humanity a favor. To begin again, rather than reformulating the same antiquated paradigms, is framed as a gift Phoenix gives to this new post-apocalyptic world. With no stable signifiers of race/ethnicity, gender, culture, or history, Phoenix feels truly free. In this sense, her heroism is debatable, but I argue that providing a ‘clean slate’ for humanity to rebuild mirrors one of the central ideas of black speculative thought.

This central idea is best described by Sun Ra in his film, *Space is the Place*, which opens with one constant refrain: “It’s after the end of the world - don’t you know that yet?” In this respect, Ra takes the radical stance that the end of the world has already occurred; communities of color, right now, are living in the post-apocalyptic. These communities have suffered through slavery, lynching, scientific experiments on non-consenting bodies, the AIDS epidemic, the crack epidemic, post-industrialism, urbanization, and gentrification. In short, quality of life for communities of color has incrementally been reduced, leaving them pressed into the most liminal spaces. Thus, if black diasporic communities already live in the post-apocalyptic, then Phoenix’s role is not one of villain but of superhero.

In the novel, Phoenix's decision to wipe 'civilization' clean is framed as the heroic act of a goddess or superhuman deity. Drawing from Igbo mythology, the protagonist likens her role as humanity's savior to the tale of Ani, a mother goddess figure linked to creation and the land. Reflecting on her decision to destroy the world and its people, Phoenix recalls the story of Ani and her relationship to this figure:

When I look deep into my DNA, I see that I know her story...Thousands of years ago, when the world was nothing but sand and dry trees, Ani looked over her lands... 'One day,' she said, 'I'll produce sunshine. Right now, I'm not in the mood.' She turned over and slept. Behind her back, as she rested, human beings sprang from the sweetest parts of the rivers and the shallow portions of the lakes...Human beings were aggressive like the rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward, cutting, carving, changing the lands...When Ani was rested enough to produce sunshine, she turned over and was horrified by what she saw...Then she reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. I am that sun. I am Ani's soldier. I do her will. Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean. (219-220)

This creation story is worth describing in detail because it reveals two key things – Phoenix's ambivalent role as superhero and her sense of diasporic belonging. Here the protagonist defines herself as a "soldier" of Ani, but Phoenix's abilities to create a cataclysmic event imply that she is no foot soldier; rather, she holds the same power of life and death over humanity as the goddess she reveres.

Having lived in a world built largely on institutions of slavery, racial oppression, and colonial domination, Phoenix's decision to destroy humanity can be read as a denial of diasporic belonging. However, her privileging of Ani, a mother goddess of Igbo legend, illustrates that she

has finally found a framework in which to ground her identity. This is made clear by her connection between Ani's story and her DNA. In this sense, Phoenix both finds a sense of belonging in her African roots and is instrumental in creating the possibility of a new and better life for those previously defined by signifiers of race/ethnicity, sex, class, etc. Per Stuart Hall, diaspora "does not refer to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must return at all costs. [Diasporic] identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and differences" (1997 52). While rooted in a profound ambivalence, Okorafor's central character in *The Book of Phoenix* uses her superhuman powers to not just transcend or transgress borders, but erase them. In this way, like Hall, Okorafor conceptualizes diaspora as a dynamic process that requires continual reconceptualization and the rebirth of new and more promising worlds.

### **Santeria as Superpower in *Brown Girl in the Ring***

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* calls attention to the unique ethnic and national identities found in the Caribbean diaspora. Both literary scholars and Hopkinson herself note the ways in which the novel uses syncretic modes of knowledge to identify both the different national distinctions within the Caribbean immigrant community and the relationship that community has in relation to Canadian society. In the case of *Brown Girl*, syncretic modes of knowledge are built around the adoption of various Pan-African religious practices through which the protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, is imbued with superhuman powers. More specifically, Hopkinson uses syncretic spiritualities like Santeria as a kind of technology to structure her use of the superhero/superheroine trope. Through this trope, she imagines diasporic identity as a "series of border crossings" that hybridize national, ethnic, and racial markers.

In the introduction to her edited anthology *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004), Hopkinson argues that writers of color must “take the meme of colonizing the natives, and, from the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it” (9). In her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Hopkinson does just this. However, Hopkinson goes beyond simply critiquing the role of the colonial subject and explores the tensions relating to women’s role in overlapping and intersecting Pan-African societies. As book reviewer, Gary Wolfe, notes in the science fiction magazine *Locus*, *Brown Girl* has a distinctively hybrid quality that makes it “something genuinely unique, a mix of near-future SF, Caribbean folklore (as transplanted to Canada), and graphic horror presented in a voice at once highly original and genre-savvy” (21). The hybridity of the novel mirrors Hopkinson’s own complex life history, given that she was born in Kingston, Jamaica, but lived in Trinidad, Guyana and The United States before eventually settling in Canada with her family. Today, she has yet again shifted back to the U.S., where she lives in Southern California as a professor of creative writing at The University of California Riverside.

Like Okorafor, Hopkinson is also interested in the intersection between gender and race within specific socio-cultural contexts. In her novel, she uses a superheroine named Ti-Jeanne to explore various models of black female diasporic identity and the struggles associated with negotiating roles prescribed to Afro-diasporic women. Ti-Jeanne’s role as a superheroine is situated in a dystopian, near-future Toronto where Afro-Caribbean spirituality features prominently. As Hopkinson describes in an interview with Alondra Nelson, her definition of speculative fiction involves “a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations” (“Making the

Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson” 2002). Hopkinson’s decision to use speculative narrative schemes stems from the need for a holistic picture of humanity removed from the need for historical specificity that authenticates the narrative. Within this perspective, intersections between gender and race can be examined as thought experiments in improving humankind’s future. Similarly, the tangible and intangible “tools” used in the past and present to exert control over women’s bodies can be discussed in ways that imagine hope for a better future.

*Brown Girl in the Ring* focuses on three generations of Caribbean-Canadian women struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic gang-controlled area of Toronto called “The Burn.” The main protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, is plagued by nightmarish visions of the future, which make it difficult for her to distinguish reality from dream. Ti-Jeanne struggles to embrace her seer role and learn from her obeah grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, to understand traditional Caribbean practices and harness her powers. Within the plot, Ti-Jeanne and her gang-affiliated former lover, Tony, is commonly read by scholars as representative of a skeptical younger generation estranged from traditional histories and knowledges. As such, characters like Tony refer to Mami Gros-Jeanne’s healing practices as “mumbo-jumbo” and frequently attempt to undermine her syncretic ways of understanding the world (*Brown Girl* 98). Science fiction scholar Sarah Wood has described Tony’s demeanor towards Mami Gros-Jeanne as “colonial” given his character’s violent resistance to acknowledging practices that exist outside of Western science (320). By positioning Ti-Jeanne as a reluctant third-generation seer woman in a dystopic Canada, Hopkinson comments on how modes of knowledge travel and evolve. Ti-Jeanne’s adaptation of her grandmother’s healing practices represent one way in which Hopkinson illustrates new formulations of black women’s diasporic identity.

Hopkinson conceptualizes a holistic and empowering form of diasporic identity through her protagonist, Ti-Jeanne's, use and adaptation of obeah practices and Santeria rituals. Ti-Jeanne begins to experiment with her powers by calling on *loa* - otherworldly entities found in Caribbean spiritualist practices typically linked to Santeria and Vodou. In many ways, Ti-Jeanne's super powers are derived from Santeria-based practices. Hopkinson draws together a wide variety of Pan-African spiritual traditions found throughout the Caribbean and central America and in doing so, demonstrates how these practices expand our understanding of diaspora. In his exploration of the evolution of Afrofuturism, George E. Lewis argues that

the science-fiction model [can] only account for a fraction of contemporary Afrodiasporic imaginings of technology...For instance, one can easily view Santeria as a kind of technology designed to facilitate communication with higher powers and condition the neo-Yoruban Afrofuture. ("Foreword: After Afrofuturism" 142)

As a "black engagement with technology," practices emanating from Afro-Caribbean traditions are conceptualized as tying one's identity to a variety of locations, social positions and cultural knowledges (142).

In terms of the novel's plot and character development, literary scholars like Gretchen Michlitsch have pointed out that Ti-Jeanne is portrayed in classic superhero fashion. Represented as a typical teenage young woman, the first glimpse readers see of her superhuman powers is through her reluctance to embrace the fact that she can "see with more than sight," which manifests through visions of others' deaths (*Brown Girl* 9). Disturbed by her visions, Ti-Jeanne initially resents her abilities and attempts to hide them from her obeah grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne. Ti-Jeanne's superhuman powers derive from a connection to *loas*, or ancestor spirits. The novel positions Ti-Jeanne's abilities as an inherited trait from her grandmother, who is a

widely respected – and feared – healer in their inner-city community. When Mami Gros-Jeanne learns the extent of her granddaughter’s visions, she prompts Ti-Jeanne to learn how to control her powers. The process of learning to harness her powers leads Ti-Jeanne to adopt spiritual practices derived from places across the Afro-diasporic world and use them to fit her specific needs as a Caribbean-Canadian woman. In so doing, *Brown Girl* highlights the fluidity and evolving nature of diasporic identity. Rather than creating a dualistic tension between Canadian and Caribbean identities, Hopkinson uses spiritual practices to demonstrate the diversity of cultures and syncretic practices found throughout the African diaspora.

In “Forms of African Spirituality in Trinidad and Tobago” (2000), Rudolph Eastman and Maureen Warner-Lewis call attention to the inherently hybridized meaning behind the term ‘obeah.’ According to them, ‘obeah’ derives from the English-speaking Caribbean tradition and implies “the power of spirituality endowed individuals, on behalf of the self or another, to manipulate spiritual forces to procure good or to activate evil or to counter evil” (404). In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (2011), Margarite Olmos also points out that as a practice typically linked to healing arts, obeah, is “a set of hybrid or creolized beliefs dependent on ritual invocation, fetishes, and charms” (113). Within the context of colonial history, obeah was viewed primarily as ‘evil magic’ and outlawed by Christian missionaries in many parts of the Caribbean. However, obeah was also used as a tool against enslavement during the colonial period. Per Leonard Barrett, a religious historian of the Caribbean, enslaved Africans would use obeah practices to undermine “the supposed sorcery of the white man” as well as poison the food of their masters (“African Religion in the Americas” 190). While it was derived from African origins, the practice of obeah has evolved through contact with various Caribbean and central American cultures in addition to Western religious practices – Catholicism in particular. In

*Brown Girl*, it is the syncretic nature of obeah that prompts Ti-Jeanne to reevaluate her identity and role as a superheroine.

To mentor Ti-Jeanne, Mami Gros-Jeanne teaches her reluctant granddaughter the names of the spirits – Shango, Shakpana, Emanjah, Ogun, Oshun, Oya, Osain, and Eshu – and explains their role in what she refers to collectively as “spirits” (*Brown Girl* 126). Before understanding her grandmother’s spiritual practices, Ti-Jeanne recalls details about the community of people around her grandmother. The narrator explains: “Ti-Jeanne could hear them speaking. Mostly Caribbean English, but some spoke Spanish and others the African-rhymed French of the French Caribbean islands” (87). It is through the practice of obeah that a wide variety of different cultures, languages, and systems of knowledge come together under one spiritual concept. Rather than homogenize her spiritual practices, Mami Gros-Jeanne asserts:

The African powers, child. The spirits. The loas. The orishas. The oldest ancestors. You will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them different names. You will even hear some names I ain’t tell you, but we all mean the same thing...Each of we have a special one who is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santeria or Voudun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits.  
(126)

For Mami Gros-Jeanne, the lived experience of being Afro-diasporic is rooted in a fluid and dynamic spiritual practice. Here Hopkinson points to obeah and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as lived and ever-evolving epistemological practices. Mami Gros-Jeanne’s practice of obeah spirituality is described as transcending markers of ethnic and/or national specificity. As Monica A. Coleman notes in her article, “Serving the Spirits: The Pan-Caribbean African-Derived Religion in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*,” Hopkinson’s novel can be read

as a melding of “various African-derived religious traditions found throughout the Caribbean into one religious practice” (1). Moreover, Coleman asserts that by “dissolving the boundaries in religious practices, ‘serving the spirits’ functions as the basis for a unique Pan-Caribbean identity” for the novel’s characters (1). This spiritual practice affords Mami Gros-Jeanne authority and power within her community, and bonds her to others who are also characterized as diasporic within a North American context.

In learning to harness her powers through the guidance of a wise mentor (Mami Gros-Jeanne), Ti-Jeanne’s character arc follows the typical trajectory of a superhero perfectly. As Ti-Jeanne develops her spiritual powers, the process of becoming a superhero depends on the proper way to use her powers. Harnessing her abilities depends largely on the ways in which she appropriates and adapts aspects of her Afro-Caribbean heritage to not only survive but help others. However, unlike traditional superheroes, Ti-Jeanne’s coming of age story is uniquely situated in her role as a young, black mother living in Toronto’s inner city. As Gretchen Michlitsch points out, “At the beginning of the novel, Ti-Jeanne does not yet understand the significance of her powers, and her hybrid status as both budding superhero and breastfeeding mother of a newborn complicates both of these new identities” (“Breastfeeding Mother Rescues City” 19). Hopkinson’s decision to write her protagonist as a superhero who is also a new mother allows her to comment on the difficulties of life as a young black woman living in the inner city as well as the importance of familial and cultural connection.

Familial and cultural connections are at the root of Ti-Jeanne’s superpowers. Indeed, without Mami Gros-Jeanne to mentor her in the spiritual arts of obeah, Ti-Jeanne struggles to harness her powers. The alienation Ti-Jeanne feels when she first begins to realize her seer abilities is replaced by a sense of connection, belonging, and confidence once she is initiated into

obeah practices. If read within the context of Boyce-Davies' concept of "migratory subjectivities" as a process of identity formation that "re-connects and re-members, brings together black women dislocated by space and time," Ti-Jeanne's use of her Santeria-based superpowers reconnects her to her Pan-African roots, her familial connections, and the larger Caribbean-Canadian community in which she lives (3).

One way in which this "re-connection" is fulfilled is through the Santeria-based practice of spirit possession. To enhance her granddaughter's powers and train her for the final showdown with her grandfather/arch nemesis, Rudy, Mami Gros-Jeanne calls upon Eshu, "the guardian of the streets, the crossroads of life and the boundaries between life and death" (*Brown Girl* 7). The compliant Eshu allows ancestral entities Papa Osain and Prince of Cemetery to cross over and inhabit Ti-Jeanne's and Mama Gros-Jeanne's bodies through what is typically referred to as spiritual possession. Hopkinson's description of their possession involves physical changes overtaking their bodies, with Mami Gros-Jeanne appearing to have "one arm...missing and one leg" (97) while Ti-Jeanne's legs seemed "longer than they were" (94). Moreover, both women's physical appearances mark them as male as Mami Gros-Jeanne has "an Adam's apple" (98) and both women's voices deepen (94). While possessed, the women take on multiple identities and selves as well as alternative forms of embodiment.

Although Ti-Jeanne and Mami Gros-Jeanne are changed during the ceremony, Hopkinson does not convey that this shift dissolves their selfhood. Instead, calling on the *loa* to inhabit their bodies is a strategy to defeat Ti-Jeanne's corrupt grandfather, Rudy, and avenge their loved ones. Ti-Jeanne's superhuman powers are described by her Eshu, Papa Legbara, as rooted in her ability to house multiple entities in her body at one time: "Well, is you call all my duppy to come do your bidding. And child, you do a thing I never seen nobody do before. For a

few minutes there, you hold eight of the Oldest Ones in your head one time” (229). While Legbara warns that this practice “could burn [her] brain out,” Ti-Jeanne is strengthened by having multiple *loa* in her body at once. For instance, when the “Oldest Ones” manifest in the final standoff with Rudy, the narrator states that “Ti-Jeanne felt the beneficence of Osain, the healer, leaching the poison from her body. Her burns and cuts healed. She could move again” (223). The narrative implies that Ti-Jeanne and the *loa* enjoy a symbiotic relationship rather than a parasitic one. These examples suggest that Ti-Jeanne is capable of coexisting with spiritual entities who inhabit her body without zombifying her. The spiritual relationship between *loa* and Ti-Jeanne has been read by scholars like Coleman as illustrative of a type of diasporic identity that celebrates the convergence between Pan-African modes of knowledge. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between Pan-African spiritualities is used as a model for third generation diasporic women living in North America to find empowerment and belonging.

While Afro-Caribbean obeah practices and rituals have historically been branded as “witchcraft” from a Western perspective, the novel offers a fantasy world where these skills save humanity. Hopkinson’s creation of a third-generation Canadian-Caribbean superheroine is deeply rooted in a critique of the demonization of Afro-Caribbean ways of life. In a sense, the obeah practices shown throughout the novel call attention to the fact that Santeria itself is a diasporic practice. While her grandmother’s healing practices are revered and stereotyped as a ‘traditional’ type of knowledge, Ti-Jeanne’s appropriation of Santeria within a dystopian warzone controlled by sadistic politicians reveals its hybridized history. It is only when Ti-Jeanne agrees to learn the healing arts from her grandmother that she is capable of resisting Rudy’s assassination attempts. Her role as a superheroine with magical powers is complete when

she makes herself vulnerable to the ancient entities who mentor and empower her to end Rudy's tyrannical reign over "The Burn."

Although Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices are conceptualized as positive when used by women, the sadistic Rudy uses these same rites to control those living within his turf. Rather than using his powers "for good" as with the superheroine Ti-Jeanne, Rudy enacts various forms of gruesome violence on anyone who threatens him – including his own family. His misuse of Afro-Caribbean epistemology allows Rudy to gain youthfulness and longevity by turning his daughter, Mi-Jeanne, into a duppy by trapping her spirit inside of a bowl. Within Afro-Caribbean folklore, Mi-Jeanne's character represents the *soucouyant*, a female entity who wears human skin but sheds it nightly to drink the lifeblood of innocent victims – especially children. In the plotline, Mi-Jeanne leaves her human form at night and roams the streets of Toronto as a ball of fire-like energy to feed on derelicts and abandoned children in the downtown area. Even in her human form, Mi-Jeanne is unrecognizable to even her closest family members, who refer to her as "Crazy Betty" – a name that indicates her unstable mental state and disheveled appearance. With her spirit under Rudy's control, Mi-Jeanne is incapable of controlling her body or protecting those she loves.

If Afro-Caribbean concepts and practices help the novel's superheroine gain her powers, then it is important to contextualize how they function within the context of spiritualisms linked to Vodou. For instance, the Vodou concept of *ashe* is helpful for understanding Ti-Jeanne's impetus to connect with her cultural heritage and why she feels obligated to protect those within her community. As Vodou *Hougan* (priest) Ross Heaven explains, *ashe* interconnects personal power with communal power (*Vodou Shaman: The Haitian Way of Healing and Power* 91). To maintain balance between the personal and communal halves of the self, human beings must

serve the spirits, establish relations between one's ancestors and the living community, and respect nature (105). Rather than conceptualize power as emanating from the self, Vodou emphasizes the relationship between self and others (91). Per Heaven, when one's *ashe* is attacked or lost, the loss of a psychological and spiritual self leads to the loss of one's soul.

In *Brown Girl*, threats leveled at women tend to be directed at their bodies. For example, as an embodiment of the *soucouyant*, Mi-Jeanne-as-duppy is a perfect example of the stripping of women's corporeal selves. Mi-Jeanne only wears a human skin to hide her true self – a bodiless entity devoid of all self-control. Similarly, Melba, a female character who is described as one of The Burn's dispossessed, is drugged and skinned alive by Rudy. In the final battle between Ti-Jeanne and Rudy, Ti-Jeanne calls upon Melba to "climb the pole" to the living world and avenge her inhumane death (221). As the Oldest Ones mobilize for the showdown against Rudy, so too do all of his victims, including Melba, who holds "her own skin over one arm" (225). Mami Gros-Jeanne's body is also targeted by Rudy, who orders Tony to harvest her heart for a corrupt politician. In the same final scene, Mami Gros-Jeanne stands proudly alongside Ti-Jeanne, "chest gaped open where her heart had been removed" (225). The forms of oppression Hopkinson imagines speak to the idea that not all forms of oppression are created equal. More specifically, Afro-Caribbean women's experience of history often involves their bodies being the space upon which power struggles are waged. The role of violence against black women's bodies in the novel also speaks to the legacies of slavery and colonialism that underpin the plot. The forms of bodily violence enacted against Mi-Jeanne, Mami Gros-Jeanne, and Melba also call attention to how black women's bodies are conceptualized as disposable and thus available for consumption. Hopkinson's portrayal of gender violence addresses how black women's bodies can be used to service any number of needs or desires requested by those in power.

Relations of power and the expendability of human life is an important theme in *Brown Girl*, especially in regards to how Hopkinson's futuristic Toronto is segregated. According to Donna McCormack, a scholar of postcolonial, feminist, and biomedical literatures, "murders only occur when the body, and the body politic, is understood as a segregated entity" ("Living With Others Inside the Self" 5). McCormack's reading of the body politic as a structuring of hierarchies that delegates who is and is not worthy of human protection does indeed explain how state-sponsored violence uses undesirable populations from Toronto's inner-city ("The Burn") as involuntary organ donors for rich, white suburbanites. While her character enacts a social critique against Canada's idealized image of multiculturalism and 'colorblindness,' Ti-Jeanne also calls attention to the ways in which black women are still seen as alien within Canada.

Hopkinson's choice of setting indicates a specific focus on Canada's colonial history in the Caribbean and its ongoing control of indigenous lands. The growing rise of popular nationalism coupled with mounting xenophobic sentiment remains a salient issue in the Western political landscape. As Michelle Reid notes in "Crossing the Boundaries of the 'Burn': Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Hopkinson's novel can be read as a "questioning of Canadian multiculturalism and the official government promotion of a diverse Canadian national identity" (297). Given the fact that populations of color have almost always bore the brunt of segregationist politics, Hopkinson's decision to create a superheroine who embodies a wide range of transnational, transcultural, and largely marginalized identities – black/Afro-Caribbean, female, and unwed mother – complicates commonplace assumptions about urban black women's ability to find spaces of agency and empowerment in North American society. Moreover, by harnessing the power of her Afro-

Caribbean belief system, Ti-Jeanne frees herself and others from the forms of institutional racism and sexism.

### **Conclusion**

I began this chapter with a question in mind: how do black writers use the superheroine archetype to work through salient issues concerning black women's identity formation in relation to diaspora? In my reading of Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, I argue that the speculative narrative schemes offer epistemological tools to better understand the gendered, ethnic/racial, and nation-based differences between black diasporic communities, especially those that have come about as a result of migrations from Africa and the Caribbean. I also contend that the special "powers" used by Okorafor's and Hopkinson's superheroines call attention to evolving forms of black identity formation among women in North America and Canada.

These novels provide new frameworks for understanding forms of diasporic community building. Themes like genetic manipulation, cultural appropriation, hybridized spiritual practices, and generational family ties provide characters with tools to reimagine their transnational identities in new and complex ways. Moreover, as it is used in these novels, the superheroine figure illustrates how diasporic identity is grounded in the convergence between multiple places and cultures. Drawing from Davies' concept of "migratory subjectivities" in relation to black women's writing, I assert that Okorafor's and Hopkinson's use of speculative tropes more broadly, and the superhero archetype specifically, illustrate the ways in which diaspora can be read as a "series of border crossings" rather than as "fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound" (3).

## CHAPTER V

### CYBORGS, ZOMBIES, AND VAMPIRES: THE GENDERED POLITICS OF DYSTOPIA IN JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO'S *LES SAIGNANTES*

How can you make an anticipation [or futuristic] film in a country that has no future? How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party? How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive? How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden?

In this chapter, I examine the film, *Les Saignantes* (2009), to argue that the director, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, uses the archetypal figures of the cyborg, zombie, and vampire to illustrate forms of gendered resistance within the African postcolony. Working within an imaginative framework allows Bekolo to explore feminine modes of resistance to what Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist, and public intellectual Achille Mbembe calls ‘necropower’ in the postcolonial African context. Furthermore, I assert that Bekolo’s use of these speculative figures offers new models of black female resistance as the film’s female protagonists struggle to realize a future based on community and egalitarianism. The film and its representation of black women’s futures is important to this project because of its transnational connections. More specifically, its situatedness in West Africa – specifically Cameroon - and distribution in France and Western art cinemas. Frequently named as one of the first Francophone sci-fi films to be created and distributed in West Africa, *Les Saignantes* adds new depth to the ways in which black women’s subjectivity is currently being radically re-conceptualized using aspects of speculative and science fiction.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of Achille Mbembe’s concept of the postcolony and, by extension, his theorizations of *commandement*, necropolitics, and death-worlds. I call attention to Mbembe’s neglect of gendered forms of resistance within the postcolonial African context, and argue that Bekolo’s framing of his female protagonists as vampiric and cyborgian

offers a unique perspective not only on modes of feminine resistance within the African postcolony, but an example of what a black women's theories of difference might look like in this context. My discussion of the zombie trope in the film interconnects with and departs from Mbembe's concept of "mutual zombification" – specifically in relation to how men are conceptualized in the film. While Mbembe's analytical frameworks of the postcolony and necropolitics call attention various issues within postcolonial African states, Bekolo's vision offers feminine forms of resistance to these oppressive structures. Ultimately, I conclude that the otherworldly powers Bekolo bestows on his female characters effectively destabilizes oppressive socio-political and gender-based constructs found in postcolonial African societies.

### **Framing the Dystopian African Postcolony: On *Commandement*, Necropower, and Death-Worlds**

In his seminal text *On the Postcolony* (2001), Achille Mbembe theorizes extensively on the connection between power and subjectivity in postcolonial Africa. He claims that a pervasive conviviality exists between postcolonial subjects and a predatory state governing body. While agency and forms of resistance are subsumed under the totality of state power, Mbembe does theorize methods of subversion available to colonial subjects. In his chapter, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities," Mbembe discusses the role of banality – that of vulgarity and the obscene – as integral to negotiations of power within the postcolony (102). Through an analysis of the "signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the commandment produces," Mbembe effectively dismantles binary oppositions that maintain dysfunctional power relations between postcolonial subjects and their former "masters" (103).

The relationship between state power and its subject is based on a structural framework he terms *commandement*. In his words: "[T]he postcolonial relationship is not primarily a

relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space” (104). Calling attention to the ‘convivial’ relationship between state power and its subjects allows Mbembe to theorize how power is deployed in postcolonial Africa. Moreover, his use of the French term *commandement* accounts for the ways in which the postcolonial state appropriates and reproduces the colonial administration’s model of governance, which was predicated on coercion and exploitation.

By describing the relationship between the postcolonial state and its subject as ‘convivial,’ Mbembe implies that this relationship is not rooted in forms of outright resistance. Rather, power in the postcolony should be understood in the manner of its performativity. Performativity, per Mbembe, refers to the ways in which power is implemented in the postcolony. Within his framing, the postcolony is a space in which power corrupts all senses and actions. The performativity of power in the postcolony is based on subjection, which ensures that all potential inconsistencies remain static and intact. In other words, the subject is formed through submission to power.

Within the context of the postcolony, then, postcolonial subjects are not only bound to but formed by their submission to colonial power. Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the postcolony is best understood as a product of colonial power, which means that when the mechanisms of colonialism are removed, the postcolony becomes a “terrain of conquest, violence, police rule and authoritarianism” (*Do Zimbabweans Exist?* 259). In this sense, while the liberation of the colony from colonial powers is typically framed as a utopian vision, the reality of the postcolony does not represent a utopian vision, but a dystopian one.

For Mbembe, the postcolony lacks uniformity and stability since it is the inheritance of colonialism, with institutions and models of governance framed on a colonial model. As he frames it, the colonial models are “alien” and mimicking them in the postcolonial African context produces unstable forms of nationhood. In *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992), Basil Davidson explains this phenomenon: “So these [colonial models] being alien models, failed to achieve the legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of African citizens, and soon [prove] unable to protect and promote interests of those citizens, save for a privileged few” (12). While the idea of liberation from colonial rule undergirds postcolonial ideology, the applied use of power within the postcolonial state reincarnates new and vicious forms of colonial power. In other words, the postcolony inherits, reinvents, refashions, and improvises colonial practices and methods of power.

Power, as it is performed in the postcolonial African context, is not legitimized as a tool of nation building; rather, it is used as a system of rewards and punishments. This system is what Mbembe refers to as *commandement*, and it is best understood as a mechanism of coercive force created for the sole purpose of ensuring obedience and docility. Ruthlessness is institutionalized through *commandement* and as such there is little regard for human life. As Mbembe points out:

[*Commandement*] embraces the images and structures power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them without, of course, discussing them. (“Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” 3)

Here Mbembe reveals the nature of *commandement* and its structuring of the postcolony as a continual engagement between those who wield power and obedient subjects. The performance

of power also determines the types of available forms of life postcolonial subjects can create and experience.

Given that *commandement* dictates that subjects remain docile and governable, the way performativity of power is actualized in the postcolony is one that preserves – at all costs – the absolute power of the state and its governing body. In this sense, those who suffer the worst forms of life within the postcolony are the powerless. Per Mbembe, the performativity of power in the postcolony “reveals itself in the guise of arbitrariness and the absolute power to give death anytime, anywhere, by means, for any reason (*On the Postcolony* 13). Within this framing, the performativity of power can be read as a technology of domination. Complete and utter subjection, the essence of the colonial project, is thus revised in the postcolony in ways that create a population of subjects that live under the continual threat of death and punishment.

In considering the extent to which death and punishment permeate postcolonial politics, Mbembe asks “what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” The question, as it relates to that ‘which is nothing’ – the postcolonial African subject – reveals that violence in the postcolonial African context is omnipotent and all-consuming. The prevalence of sadistic violence suggests that it has been normalized in every facet of life in the postcolonial state. Within this framing, violence is not only used as an instrument of state power but is also internalized by the citizenry in various ways. In the postcolonial state, where violence is normalized, bodies are best understood as dead while alive.

In his 2003 article, “Necropolitics,” Mbembe describes what he called “death-worlds,” which involve ways of dying and ‘life in death’ within the context of the postcolony (40). In his framing of necropolitics, it is in death-worlds that violence and death are naturalized as lived realities and conditions of life. As Mbembe describes it, the mode of life in the political world is

predicated on confrontation, defamiliarization, and dehumanization. Death-worlds imply a politics of space where the performance of power is predicated upon a population of living dead. Within the postcolonial African context, then, death-worlds are inhabited by African subjects who are vulnerable to death not only because they are on the receiving end of a corrupt governing state, but because the exercise of power in this state constructs them as always already dead. In “Outlines of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence” (2001), Etienne Balibar expounds on the concept of death-worlds by stating that forms of extreme violence in a globalized context segment portions of the world into “*life zones and death-zones*” (24 emphasis in original). In death-zones, life and death are conflated to the point where the will to live implies a desire to die. In this way, spaces like the postcolony exhibit extreme forms of human life.

Death-worlds and the forms of ‘life’ they produce are complex in nature, and the conditions of violence within them are absolute and structural. According to film theorist Frank B. Wilderson, death-worlds exist because the nature of violence both precedes and exceeds the life of African subjects (75). The postcolonial state kills targets through widespread unemployment and poverty, the restriction of social services (medical, education, health, police, etc.), mass incarcerations, restrictive voting practices, infant mortality rates, etc. These are the lived experiences of many African subjects living in the postcolony and it is through these conditions that their social existence is structured. In his articulation of death-worlds as symptomatic of necropolitics and necropower, Mbembe focuses exclusively on visible forms of violence – absolute violence – however, he neglects to consider structural violence and the ways in which individual bodies are affected by necropower in stratified ways.

## Mutual Zombification and Gendered Resistance

Mbembe's concepts of necropower and the creation of death-worlds define the African postcolony as a space where humans are marked for death and/or existence in a state of the living dead where there are few spaces of resistance. The concept of mutual zombification, as it is defined by Mbembe, relates to the 'convivance' previously mentioned between the corrupt postcolonial state and its subjects. The convivial nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled implies a slippage between binary formulations of resistance/ domination. Conviviality, in short, is how the governing body and the governed assume complex relational forms that can be described as mutual zombification. In this relationship, the performativity of power by the corrupt postcolonial governing body and postcolonial subjects' responses to that power create impotency in both parties.

In his article, "Post-Colonial Perils: Art and National Impossibilities" (2011), Patrick D. Flores argues that mutual zombification is an "idiom of suffering through intimacy" (78). For Mbembe, what makes African subjects complicit in their zombification is a "unitary system of ensnarement" between the postcolonial state and its subjects (*On the Postcolony* 128). Moreover, within this relationship, "this process does not increase either the depth of subordination or the level of resistance; it simply reduces a situation of disempowerment for both ruled and rulers" (111). What exists in the postcolony is a situation where "promise has been replaced by the lack of expectation" (199). In this context, the promise of a liberated Africa is met only by a new form of colonial rule in the postcolonial era.

Put another way, power negotiation in the postcolony is a matter of everyday life and its iterations shift and change in relation to the governing body and the governed. If we take this framing of postcolonial power relations to be accurate, then power and potential modes of

resistance should be recognized as fluid and variable. For Mbembe, subjects have no single identity, but multiple ones that they can negotiate and modify as needed to avoid being labeled as dissident by sovereign power. Per Daniel Hammett, the ways in which power is understood and lived in the political invites complexities and modes of resistance: “It is within the rubric of power relations that dissent, assent, reification and resistance are conceived and expressed” (“Political Cartoons, Post-colonialism and Critical African Studies” 4). Even under the control of *commandement*, African subjects in the postcolony cannot be conceptualized as inherently passive nor completely ‘zombified.’ Instead, their engagement with absolute power walks the line between conviviality and outright resistance. As postcolonial subjects walk this line, there is a certain ambivalence involved in ‘acting’ as part of the state’s ‘living dead’ and the reality that the postcolonial state does in fact mark its subjects for death.

In his assessment of Mbembe’s concept of postcoloniality, Jeremy Weate notes, “for Mbembe, in an African context, there are simply no spaces of resistance available outside domination (unofficial or otherwise)” (“Postcolonial Theory on the Brink” 1). However, Mbembe’s concept of an “aesthetics of vulgarity” via the obscene and grotesque are the primary ways in which postcolonial African subjects are understood to undermine the power of *commandement*. Vulgarity, the obscene – and, I would add, the speculative – create expressions of resistance to corrupt state power. For Mbembe, African subjects in the postcolony always use ordinary movements and mannerisms to navigate power without confronting it directly. However, using narrative tropes, vulgar references and obscene representations can constitute the very act of “subverting power relations, exploitation and repression” (Hammett 5). The goal of undermining state power is not necessarily its eradication; rather, it is an attempt to expose its

other side – its nakedness. In other words, in a postcolonial state where all forms of life are reduced to death, making a joke of death might be the only way to survive.

Returning to “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly,” Mbembe examines the Bakhtinian notion of banality – that of the obscene and grotesque – as integral to negotiations of power within the postcolony (102). Through an analysis of the “signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the commandment produces,” he effectively dismantles binary oppositions that maintain dysfunctional power relations between postcolonial subjects and their former “masters” (*On the Postcolony* 103). Per Mbembe, grotesque images and slogans subvert and critique corrupt postcolonial political systems that, in many cases, can be traced back to the “trail of violence and domination intrinsic to the *commandment*” (107). However, this tyranny cannot simply be characterized as coercion; rather, it conveys a certain intimacy that implicates the subjects of the commandment as reproducers of authoritarian epistemologies through the “minor circumstances” of their daily lives (128). In this sense, grotesque imagery and vulgarity can be characterized as forms of resistance within the postcolony, albeit an ambivalent form of resistance.

Within *Les Saignantes*, grotesque and banal imagery are embedded within the narrative as discrete forms of resistance to the corrupt governmental structure. This imagery is illustrated best through Bekolo’s use of cyborg, vampire, and zombie archetypes. While all characters are described as the ‘living dead’ in the film, Bekolo’s deployment of these archetypes allow characters to enact forms of resistance to necropower. In many ways, these archetypes are best characterized as vulgar, since they are frequently used to explore the most feared and abject forms of human life. Both inside and outside of definitions of the human, Bekolo’s cyborgian, vampiric, and zombified characters can be read as an illustration of the vulgar as a form of resistance to postcolonial power.

In her 2002 article, “Afro-Pessimism’s Many Guises,” African American scholar, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, points out two important omissions within Mbembe’s theorization of the postcolonial subject – gender and gendered forms of embodiment. Jules-Rosette critiques Mbembe’s “African Modes of Self-Writing” (2002) by calling attention to his elision of gender in his theorization of the postcolonial African subject. She notes the resourceful ways in which African women have made meaningful changes in their societies. Using the example of Nigerian market women and Congolese *cambistes* (street bankers), she writes:

Mbembé avoids any systematic discussion of gender as an aspect of selfhood or subjectivity. Instead, he privileges dominant ideologies, institutions, and public instruments of power over private sources of resistance. The absence of any treatment of women’s initiatives and unique inscriptions of selfhood is both a theoretical and empirical lacuna in Mbembé’s argument. (604)

Jules-Rosette’s analysis of gender representation in the postcolony reveals how Mbembe’s concept of necropower privileges a male African subject. As many African societies tend to be based on patriarchal structures and norms, considering how the lived experiences of African women is integral to any holistic theorization of the African postcolony. Rather than constructing women as victims of dehumanizing forms of postcolonial power and patriarchal practices, it is important to consider the possibility of transcending, if only in a temporary sense, the position of an oppressed subject marked for death.

Examples of gendered resistance in relation to Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, death-worlds, and the African postcolony are sparse. Beyond Jules-Rosette’s critique, few feminist interventions have been made in regards to these theorizations of the postcolonial African subject. As I shift to my reading of *Les Saignantes*, I argue that the film’s creator, Jean-Pierre

Bekolo uses the archetypal figures of the cyborg, vampire, and zombie to figuratively ‘act out’ modes of feminine resistance to corrupt postcolonial state power. By doing so, he comes into conversation with Mbembe’s concept of power and illustrates ways in which women are agents of change and subversion within the postcolonial African context.

### **Contextualizing *Les Saignantes*: Cinematic and Scholarly Reception**

The film community was first introduced to *Les Saignantes* in 2005 after its production and previewing at the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), and later in 2007 at the Cannes Film Festival and Pan-African film festival (FESPACO). While it received polarized reviews shortly after its release at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2005, the film received a largely positive critical response during screening at both TIFF and FESPACO. *Les Saignantes* was also awarded the prestigious *Etalon d’argent de Yennega* award, which provided Bekolo with a substantial five million CTA francs to find a viable means of distributing the film.

Audience reception to the film fluctuated between a critique of the film’s poor production value – an element that many saw as limiting its ability to be true ‘science fiction’ – while others found it an apt commentary on contemporary African politics. Despite its international reputation in the film festival world, *Les Saignantes* remained without a distributor until roughly May 2009, when Bekolo pursued options in France. In Cameroon, Bekolo faced significant challenges due to censorship concerns. Due to its unconventional depiction of gender dynamics, unique lighting and editing style, and mixing of various filmic genres, many critics have defined it as a pastiche that comments on a variety of socio-political, artistic, and cultural issues within the context of postcolonial Cameroonian society.

As Francophone African film critic, Olivier Bartlet, has argued, the saturated tones and exaggerated style of acting in *Les Saignantes* invites viewers to read the film not only as a text but also as a type of abstract painting due to its caricature-like interpretation of reality. Barlet interprets inter-filmic connections with avant-garde Japanese filmmaker Takeshi Kitano in Bekolo's work due to the ways in which he depicts "a scathing burlesque under cold lights to scoff at death" (2007). Likewise, African film scholar, Kenneth Harrow, describes the film's self-reflexive style as containing textual and artistic elements that "stand in relation to the film as a preface does to a book" (45). Harrow's opaque essay is an exercise in deconstruction which discusses the significance of self-reflexivity and genre within the film. In response to critiques aimed at the film's genre bending and self-reflexivity, Harrow highlights that depictions of "reality" are assumed to be unmediated and truthful which, of course, only calls further attention to the ways in which "non-fiction" must omit certain aspects of a larger "reality" to construct one complete, coherent work. In other words, depictions of "reality" are always crafted according to singular perspectives that cannot necessarily include a holistic worldview free of context-specific restrictions, omissions and inconsistencies.

Harrow's comments on the fine distinctions between fact and fiction come into conversation with African literary critic Matthew Omelsky's thoughts on Bekolo's decision to use speculative imagery in order to dissolve the "boundary separating the real and the imaginary" (Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *African Cyborgian Thought*" 7). As Omelsky argues, the use of futuristic landscapes allows the filmmaker to not merely push the boundaries of reality but transcend them. In *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo recreates humans with "new anatomy," rewrites society's ancient myths on near-future landscapes, and effectively creates "new narratives that provoke critical awareness and political transformation" (6). Omelsky points out that the film's didactic language

illustrates how the act of “(re)imagining is itself a political act” (9). Moreover, he argues that Bekolo offers a “cyborgian vision” that subverts hegemonic discourse through hyperbole, negative tropes, and bleak landscapes (9). Omelsky argues that Bekolo’s “cyborgian vision” is intended to inspire social action in African youth. By using extra-diegetic content and imitating video game sequencing, Omelsky reads *Les Saignantes* as a way to “show youth his vision of society’s new anatomy and to urge them to challenge dominant modes of thought” (7).

While Bartlet, Harrow, and Omelsky all focus on significant issues relating to Bekolo’s unique film language and use of cyborg imagery, few perform a thorough critique of how African women’s bodies are represented in the film apart from one literary critic – Naminata Diabate. In her dissertation, “Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film,” Diabate features a chapter specifically on *Les Saignantes* and postcoloniality in relation to African women’s bodies. Diabate’s argument on what she calls “genital power” and its depiction in *Les Saignantes* offers a substantial analysis on how the film repositions West African women’s bodies outside discourses of disease, pathology, and victimization. While Diabate reads the juxtaposition between female bodies and masculine nationalist symbols as an attempt to highlight the connection between women, corruption, and the “ills of the postcolonial state,” she also notes Bekolo’s ambivalence toward the potential long-term solutions this message offers (23). Her discussion of the Mevougou ritual and women’s sexual potency as a route to heal the postcolonial state is both refreshing and thorough.

My own reading of *Les Saignantes* echoes Diabate insofar as I too remain skeptically cautious about interpreting West African women’s bodies as embodying a ‘cure’ for repressive forms of thought and governance. Her claims about Bekolo’s use of the film as a social commentary on Cameroon as a diseased postcolonial state highlight how pathological imagery

frequently is linked to African women's bodies and subject positions. While much of my analysis parallels Diabate's reading, I depart from her focus on pathology and anthropological examination of the Mevougou ritual to instead examine *Les Saignantes'* use of archetypal imagery in relation to the vampire, cyborg, and zombie. In so doing, I propose that Bekolo uses these tropes to dramatize how Cameroon's present political instability affects women and imagines alternatives beyond the frame of the postcolonial nation-state.

### **Bekolo's Reclamation of the Postcolonial African State**

While hope galvanized many newly independent African countries during the 1960's and 1970's, the post-colonial/postcolonial period has been characterized by many as Africa's lost decade. Per Goran Hyden, "In the 1980's, the number of African low-income countries (under \$700 GNP per capita) was eighteen. In 1995 it had gone up to 27" (*African Politics in Comparative Perspective* 1). In the 1990's, Structural Adjustment Programs imposed on many African countries by both the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) only exacerbated their economic instabilities and ability to maintain basic institutional structures. The 'failure' of many postcolonial African states fostered, for many observers from both inside and outside the continent, a pessimistic perspective about Africa's ability to confront serious socio-political, economic, and health-related issues. However significant these issues may be, the level of overgeneralization frequently homogenizes the continent along racial lines (i.e. Sub-Saharan 'black' Africa vs. Arab/Muslim North Africa). Moreover, this mindset also encourages a selective focus on negative news from the continent.

This negative view of African development is exacerbated further by Western epistemology and the politics of development economics in general. Given that narratives of national development are typically built using the idealized example of Western European

history, Africa's postcolonial issues are framed as an example of the continent's refusal to join modern, civilized society. Joining modernity also includes entering history, an assumption that has been reinforced by both news coverage as well as assessments by world leaders. Perhaps the most notable misrepresentation of Africa's 'inability to enter history' was provided in a 2007 speech delivered in Dakar, Senegal, by former French president, Nicholas Sarkozy when he claimed:

Africa's tragedy is that the African man has not yet entered history [...] In this imaginary world, everything is repeated and there is no place for exploration or the idea of progress [...] This (traditional African) man never pushed toward the future. The idea never arrived for him to leave repetition behind and create his own destiny. (My translation)

Of course, Sarkozy's words only mirror Hegel's own racist assumptions of the continent. In his 1822-1830 lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel claimed:

at this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit [...] What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the world's history. (*Philosophy of History* 99)

Here I find it apt to address the epigraph at the beginning of my chapter, which is a collection of extra-diegetic questions posed by Bekolo throughout *Les Saignantes*. These questions are used as a way of drawing attention to and critiquing negative perspectives through which many African countries are identified. In considering the first question – How can you make an anticipation [or futuristic] film in a country that has no future? – Bekolo questions the assumptions surrounding Africa as a space outside of history and devoid of a viable future. It is through these extra-

diegetic devices and the narrative form that Bekolo seeks to disrupt the idea of Africans as “unhistorical” and incapable of creating their own destiny. As a film that incorporates a futuristic plot, *Les Saignantes* functions as a critique of Eurocentric cultural logic that sees African countries as existing outside of time, modernity, and ‘progress.’ In short, Africa and Africans are always already conceptualized as dystopian, and it is this framing that Bekolo seeks to unmask and refute.

Bekolo’s investment in working against assumptions about Africa’s supposed backwardness is complicated by the fact that his home country of Cameroon is indeed plagued by various forms of corruption. Thus, the path to finding a futuristic vision for many African states is not simply a matter of rebutting racist remarks like those made by Sarkozy or Hegel, but rather, providing alternative realities and futures that can envision the possible. For Bekolo, the practice of imagining is done through a narrative form he calls ‘applied fiction’:

I advocate Applied Fiction, my grandmother’s method [...] It is applied fiction that will free us from an audiovisual symbolic language that imposes its own kind of reality upon us. This reduces us to consumers without an opinion other than the one supplied by omnipresent medias. This keeps us believing that both “story” and “actuality” are separate while they are now only one thing. When my old woman tells me her stories she does so to draw me in into the universe; when the media, at its most corrupt, tells me stories, it is done to push me away from the universe... We shouldn’t just be making movies we should be changing reality. (113)

In applied fiction, viewer engagement with the narrative is integral to fulfill its goal – the transformation of society. In other words, the film becomes an instrument through which the audience is impacted and inspired to create change in their communities. Thus, the questions

Bekolo poses in the film become tools of social engagement that compel viewers to challenge assumptions about the world in which they live and the prejudices they may hold. In short, it is through social activism that applied fiction can be translated into reality.

Much like Bekolo's idea of applied fiction, speculative and science fiction is commonly used both as a form of social critique and as an example of futures yet to be realized. Afrofuturism, as an Afrocentric extension of these genres, also seeks to undermine misrepresentations of black cultures, bodies and spaces. As Griffith Rollefson explains it, Afrofuturism "combats whitewashed visions of tomorrow generated by a global 'future industry' that equates blackness with the failure of progress and technological catastrophe [by] undermining the normalized disparity between the black body and the cybernetic technological future" ("The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis" 84). While the project of Afrofuturism does work against Eurocentric constructions of time, epistemology, and identity, it seeks to disrupt dualisms rather than invert them. In *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo does not simply refute the supposed primitive or backwards nature of the continent, it poses questions that ask how Africans can create their own futures – on their own terms.

An important aspect of Africans determining their own futures, for Bekolo, involves critiquing certain restrictive cultural practices. The film's opening voice-over – "We were in 2025 and nothing had changed..." – indicates that the current state of the continent is far from promising. In fact, while the film has been described as 'science fiction,' the landscape and materials that characterize Bekolo's 'futuristic' Cameroon are, barring some high-tech cars, barely distinguishable from the present. Instead of an aesthetically 'futuristic' landscape, characters' actions and 'powers' imply that they live in a speculative or sci-fi future. It is through these powers or abilities that Bekolo draws attention to the relationship between Africa's

systemically corrupt present and its potential future as an egalitarian, community-based nation-state.

One of the primary issues concerns the patriarchal structure still framing many postcolonial African societies. Bekolo's dismantling of strict dichotomies and linear epistemologies centers on offering viewers new visions of the future, but not as a substitute for an old or primitive past. Instead he calls for the audience to be open about considering alternatives to the present – to uncertainty – and to a politics that insights action, not apathy, towards the current issues facing Africa. For Bekolo, his decision to use female protagonists in a dystopian African society is significant. In "The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism," an interview with Akin Adesokan, the director states:

I had the idea that if I focused on women, I would really touch on very sensitive issues in society. I was trying to make a film about Cameroon, and so it was important to bring up the issue of women's relationship with men in power. That is a sensitive issue, and it would seem more interesting than if the central characters were to be boys. Also, there is a connection between the idea of human corruption and girls. (2)

Here Bekolo calls attention to the thread between Cameroonian women's bodies and systemic corruption within the postcolonial African state. However, what this statement adds to our critical understanding of Bekolo's position on using women in the film is the paradox between the 'misuse' of women's bodies for transactional sex and women's complicity in the continued moral corruption of the postcolonial state. The experiences Bekolo describes here do not appear to be purely anecdotal. The paradoxical ways in which Bekolo describes Cameroonian women in these interviews are reflected in *Les Saignantes'* two primary female characters – Majolie and ChouChou.

Bringing this interview into conversation with the film's diegetic content, it appears that Bekolo's perspective on women's bodies is fraught by contradictions. On the one hand, he recognizes their significance in shaping the postcolonial state and appears to argue that women must be seen as agents of change who can correct systemic corruption. On the other hand, rather than addressing questions of women's status and conditions, he seems to use female sexuality as a marketing technique to promote the film's activist agenda. Diabate highlights this contradiction in her dissertation chapter on *Les Saignantes*, where she argues that Bekolo's use of the term 'girls' as interchangeable with 'women' is a "problematic way of speaking about women because it ignores the variable of age and infantilizes the protagonists" ("Genital Power" 257). While his perspective on gender is suspect, Bekolo's ambivalence through which he represents women's bodies offers multiple perspectives on the connection between women's agency and the dystopian African state depicted in the film. As I explain below, Bekolo's ambivalence concerning women's role in postcolonial African societies is illustrated through his use of cyborg, vampire, and zombie imagery in the film.

### **Destabilizing Dystopia: Cyborgs, Vampires, and Zombies**

The term *cyborg*, short for 'cybernetic organism,' was coined in 1960 by scientists Manfred S. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline. As it has evolved in Western popular culture, the term is typically used to describe a being or entity that is part human and part machine. Originally, cyborgs' technological enhancements were intended to help them better cope with the conditions of space travel. However, as the cultural mythos of the cyborg has expanded and taken on new meanings, this figure is now symbolic of the ways in which technology has transformed and continues to surpass what is traditionally understood to be human. As embodiments of super-humanness, cyborgs disrupt categorical definitions of 'the human' and unsettle the status quo.

Moreover, the cyborg is frequently used to question what qualifies as human, and at what point someone ceases to be human.

While many writers tend to use the cyborg as a metaphor for concerns about advancements in techno-science, they occupy a more ambivalent position when addressed within the context of race and gender. For example, in the DC comic, *Cyborg*, the main protagonist, Vic Stone, is African American. His identity as a black man is integral to both the comic's plotline as well as his cyborg-ness. In other words, his identity as a cyborg does not protect him from the vagaries of living in downtown Detroit, which include gang violence, drugs and institutional racism. In a 2012 lecture at Williams College, Joy James frames the black cyborg thus:

a black cyborg: a modified, improved human whose increased ethical, spiritual, and physical capabilities generate unusual strength, omniscience, and boundless love. In this narrative, the black cyborg is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important social construction, a world-changing fiction...[T]he black cyborg is able to overcome the brutality of imposed limits—the conditions of social and physical death. (“Refusing Blackness as Victimization” 18)

Within this framing, James argues that the black cyborg's power derives from (his) blackness. In fact, given that cyborgs are intended to disrupt social inequalities, the creation of a black cyborg is an effective tool against discourses that dehumanize blackness. However, like most comic book figures, Stone's cyborgian self comes with a host of drawbacks – the technology implanted in his brain and body are sometimes out of his control. While this technology holds the power to keep him alive, the paradoxical nature of Cyborg is that his personal identity can be ‘disabled.’

As Marquis Bey points out in “Between Blackness and Monstrosity: Gendered Blackness in the *Cyborg* Comics,” while blackness “is not a disability, it typically carries with it burdens and ontological constrictions (e.g. beliefs of Black subjects’ intellectual inferiority, perceived innate criminality, licentiousness, underservingness of life, Afro-pessimistic position of abjection, etc.) that ‘disable’ the subject” (42). Although this reading of the cyborg relates directly to the *Cyborg* character as an African American male, one can read *Les Saignantes*’ female cyborgs in a similar vein – albeit with more intersectional subject positions like gender, nationality, and even sexual orientation. More specifically, the histories and ‘ontological constrictions’ that ‘disable’ Bekolo’s female protagonists are also the things that propel them toward action and social change. In this way, black cyborgian identities are paradoxical in that they are controlled by social factors but also possess superhuman abilities.

According to its technological definition, the cyborg is a “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism.” Understood as a metaphor, this figure is simultaneously “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (“A Cyborg Manifesto” 149). Its existence is based on three main boundary dissolutions that threaten Western epistemology: human versus animal, organisms versus machines, and physical versus non-physical (i.e. human bodies as opposed to cyber intelligences). Metaphorically, it is important to understand that the cyborg, in its technological manifestation, is a state of consciousness that has developed from certain socio-political circumstances. These circumstances have in turn created the conditions for rich narratives. Historically, the cyborg figure has grown out of the contradictions of exploitation and agency that socio-cultural moments produce. Its origin is thus rooted in the spaces of imagination/representation as well as material relations, which is why it is typically used to critique social power and the politics of representation.

Within a feminist framework, the cyborg reimagines ideological oppositions between reason/nature by marrying the female body to technological advancements. However, this relationship is always ambivalent since the systems of power that control technology also have access to cyborgian women's bodies. Given that one of the most basic dualisms of Western thought – reason versus nature – has paired women with nature and machines, the female cyborg figure has posed significant issues for many feminists. However, Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism highlights the implosion of binaries created by technological advancements while also recognizing the repressive dimensions of patriarchal techno-science. What the cyborg figure makes available is a blurring of gender boundaries, class divisions, and racial categories, which creates the possibility of theorizing new modes of being that transcend dualisms.

In *Les Saignantes*, the cyborg figure is distinctly transnational in nature. Adapted for African audiences to illustrate societal concerns over the shortcomings of masculinist forms of postcolonial nationalism, Bekolo combines classic cyborg imagery with location-specific beliefs and folklore. By so doing, he can use the cyborg as a more potent form of social critique. As a transnational or transcultural iteration of the cyborg, this figure can be read in relation to any number of figures related to Afro-Caribbean cultural beliefs, such as the zombie or *soucouyant*. In fact, both the cyborg and zombie occupy similar positions in the global imaginary, with a few key distinctions relating to corporeality and autonomy.

In "Toward a Zombie Epistemology: What It Means to Live and Die in *Cabin in the Woods*," Deanna Day distinguishes between zombie and cyborg imagery in relation to societal power structures. In regards to cyborg epistemology, organic beings (humans) are manipulated and ordered according to the desires of a powerful few – those who control global technological systems. As Day explains, cyborgs are created by individuals submitting to a hegemonic system

of authority and control based on a manufactured idea of “success” or “purpose.” The concept of success is, per Day,

specifically cast as a kind of prepared hopefulness where, by financially entangling individuals into particular family and community structures, we might be able to ward off whatever it is that is impending at this moment: global economic collapse, the death of the American family, etc. The imperative to work for the survival of future generations, rather than for happiness in the moment, makes it not only possible but a seeming inevitability that life must be for many people an exercise of sacrifice. (2014)

In this reading, the cyborg colludes with the system to ensure a stable future. Moreover, various technologies of command and control are used to manipulate the bodies, thoughts and emotions of organic beings (humans) and their material world to create the possibility of the cyborg.

Like the cyborg, the zombie figure is also understood as manipulated by a central source that determines the actions of “the horde.” However, rather than being driven toward a stable future, zombies are grounded in a drive towards failure, consumption, death, and the dissolution of individual subjectivity. Historically, zombies are linked to systems of global capitalism, imperialism, science, and technological advances. Within popular culture, films like the 1932 classic *White Zombie* use Haitian folklore of zombies being revived to work in sugar mills, *Night of the Living Dead*'s (1968) features the premise of rogue space radiation, and contemporary thrillers like *28 Days Later* (2003) and *World War Z* (2013) imagine global pandemics. As these films show, zombies frequently represent the victims of modern techno-science in the Western popular imagination.

Philosophers like Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze have argued that zombies represent “the only modern myth” of rationalizing the death and destruction of populations. Within this

framing, individual deaths serve a purpose – the preservation of a stable, unburdened civilization in a technocratic era (*L'Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 355). In the scholarly collection, *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (2011), editors Sarah Juliet Lauro and Deborah Christie argue that the zombie represents an ever-evolving lens through which to theorize the human. As a theoretical apparatus that allows us to evaluate our evolving relationship to new technologies, forms of governance and structures of power, adaptations of the zombie figure hone in on specific socio-cultural tensions.

Furthermore, in *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks* (2017), Chera Kee argues that contemporary iterations of the zombie should be read in relation to the figure's roots in Haitian Vodou practices. Per Kee, the incorporation of zombies into the popular Western imagination originated from fears of Haiti as an independent black republic. As she explains this trend, anxiety about Haiti in the United States translated into anxiety about Vodou, which was

increasingly linked to cannibalism in the U.S. popular press to underscore supposed Haitian primitivism...the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cannibalistic discourse surrounding Haitian Voodoo was transformed into a racialized discourse in early zombie films, but it becomes evident that over time, as the zombie matured, the overt link to Haiti and Voodoo dissolved so that zombies came to represent any ethnic group. (9-10)

As Kee's historical contextualization demonstrates, the evolution of the zombie figure is rooted in a fear of the racialized Other just as the cyborg is predicated on a fear of techno-science. The incorporation of cannibalism into zombie imagery speaks to white anxiety concerning racial outsiders consuming resources, challenging Western superiority and polluting genealogical bloodlines.

Historically, the use of the term ‘zombie’ was unknown outside of Haiti until 1929 when the publication of William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* introduced the figure to Western audiences. Wade Davis’s *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988) provides a comprehensive overview of the classical notion of the Haitian zombie. Davis differentiates between “spirit zombies” and “living dead” zombies that are characterized as “innocent victims raised in a comatose trance from their graves by malevolent sorcerers” (60). Defined as “slaves” according to “folk belief,” Haitian zombies can be “recognized by their docile natures, their glassy, empty eyes...and by the absence of will, memory, and emotion” (60). Used as a source of titillation for Western audiences, this concept of the Haitian zombie was popularized in the 1940’s - a decade after the U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1935. The notion of Haitians as superstitious automatons who threaten Western national borders and economic superiority fell neatly into colonial discourse, and perpetuated the myth of black populations as not only primitive but also hostile to white norms.

As Kyle Bishop has pointed out in his book, *American Zombie Gothic* (2010), imperialist discourse popularized in the 1940’s facilitated the production of films that played on Americans’ fears concerning miscegenation and hybridity (69). As the site of the only successful slave revolution and independent black nation-state, Haiti plays a unique role in the Western cultural imaginary. The Haitian zombie thus reflects fears concerning the threat of black supremacy and power over Western spaces and peoples. As they are represented today, zombies have evolved into a uniquely transcultural and transnational phenomenon, per Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller. In their book, *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural Migrations and Transnational Interpretations* (2016), Fischer-Hornung and Mueller argue that the zombie figure has become a “hybrid, an empty signifier to be filled with meaning at will” (4). They assert that

“transcultural and transnational imaginaries have shaped and altered” the zombie trope, which affects how they are represented and interpreted (5). Today, zombies are commonly used to complicate assumptions surrounding supposed ‘failed states,’ global consumptive practices, porous national borders, global health epidemics, and the role of Third World economies in an increasingly globalized market.

In a similar vein to the cyborg and zombie figures, the vampire demonstrates how women’s bodies have been marked as agents of moral corruption, metaphors for failed independence, and hypersexual commodities for consumption. Myriad stories of vampire-related lore span across the Africana world — from the *adze* of West Africa to the *soucouyant* of the Caribbean. Indeed, vampire beliefs that existed in Africa followed African slaves who were brought to the West to work in English, French, and Dutch colonies in both the U.S. and the Caribbean. For instance, Haitian folklore describes shape-shifting creatures who disguise themselves as old women by day and shed their mortal skin by night to suck the blood of innocents. These creatures are called *loogaroo*, a term closely aligned with *soucouyant* lore. This concept interconnects with tales of the Surinamese *asema*, Trinidadian *sukuyan*, as well as West African tales of *obayifo*, *asiman*, and *asasabonsam*. The common thread between these mythical figures is their feminization, their insatiable thirst for blood, and their ability to live “incognito in the community” (Melton 4-5). As scholars like Jerry Rafiki Jenkins note, myth-based Afrocentric stories can be traced from their more traditional beginnings to hybridized versions in works like Alexandre Dumas’s play *Le Vampire* (1851) all the way up to contemporary retellings of vampire lore in films like *Blacula* (1970) and *The Blade Trilogy* (1998, 2002, 2004).

While many of these stories still focus on a male protagonist, there is a wealth of fiction and film on vampires by black female writers typically labeled under the genre of Afrofuturism.

In her reading of speculative fiction by women writers of color, Susana M. Morris notes that the vampire trope often challenges anxieties within mainstream contemporary culture and proposes “epistemologies that do not suggest Utopian panaceas but instead underscore the importance of transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy, epistemologies that ultimately present possibilities for our own decidedly unenchanted world” (“Black Girls Are from the Future” 147). Stories written by writers of color — especially black women — frequently position their characters in ambivalent situations from which there are no easy means of escape. Rather than using fiction to transcend the realities of systemic racism and gender violence, writers of color call attention to existing racist and sexist epistemologies by making their fictional characters susceptible to the same types of violence and forms of uprootedness experienced by those from both the continent as well as the diaspora.

Within the context of speculative and science fiction literature, Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* (2005) and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991) offer female-authored examples of vampire folklore. *Fledgling*’s vampires are described as a powerful humanoid species with superior physical and mental abilities. While they consume blood to survive as in the traditional framing of vampire lore, Butler’s vampires rely on familial systems and communities that reconfigure heteronormative rules of intimacy. Moreover, rather than existing outside of history, Butler’s vampires are directly affected by and susceptible to racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism as they attempt to symbiotically coexist with their human hosts and each other. In sharp contrast to vampires as supernatural beings — a trope made popular by myriad white (male) writers and filmmakers — the vampires that populate *Fledgling* are conceptualized as a biological species that predate humans. Butler’s deft interweaving of the scientific with the folkloric has led scholars like Marty Fink to argue that “Butler’s approach to [the vampire] genre is characterized

by duality and fusion, as the novel interbreeds the vampire narrative with science fiction” (“AIDS Vampires” 428).

In the case of author Jewelle Gomez, vampire mythology is used to interrogate assumptions about her own identity as a black lesbian woman. Her use of speculative narrative tropes makes striking interconnections between issues related to race, sexuality, power, and desire that effectively strip away the dogma surrounding the vampire figure as a figment of white imaginations. In her words, “The challenge for me was to create a *new* mythology, to strip away the dogma that has shaped the vampire figure within the rather narrow Western, Caucasian expectation, and to create a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference” (87-88). Gomez’s use of this figure not only offers new ways of reading vampirism within a non-white contemporary context, it also reveals new forms of representation available for black women.

As Kathy Davis Patterson notes in “‘Haunting Back’: Vampire Subjectivity in *The Gilda Stories*,” Gomez’s illustrations of vampires use overt female-focused imagery. While vampire-related storylines typically link “feeding” and “biting” to rapacious white males, Gomez “deemphasizes the connection between feeding and rape so common in vampire fiction and portrays vampirism itself as no longer an exercise of distinctly masculine power” (14). Within the context of these stories, the phallic imagery related to vampires’ long, sharp fangs and penetrating marks is replaced by narrow slits in the flesh reminiscent of a vaginal opening. Moreover, Gomez uses various mothering and birthing tropes to describe the act of vampiric “feeding.”

Rather than evoke the predator/victim relationship that pervades vampire fiction from Stoker’s *Dracula* to Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, *The Gilda Stories* weaves a story of

characters engaging in symbiotic relationships where the sharing of blood creates pleasurable emotions and sensations for both parties. Rather than taking lives, Gomez's protagonist, Girl – who later comes to be called Gilda – gives “birth” to a family through the giving and receiving of blood. In this sense, Gomez's perspective offers a unique take on vampirism that locates power within a more female-friendly paradigm.

### **The Vampire and Mevougou**

As a narrative trope in *Les Saignantes*, vampirism highlights the predatory and parasitic nature of the corrupt postcolonial African nation-state. When the vampire is embodied in women attempting to survive in a dystopian African country, this figure takes on new and complex meanings. Like Jewel Gomez, Bekolo flips the script on misogynistic, nation-focused interpretations of black female sexuality. In *Les Saignantes*, the vampire archetype is reimagined using Mevougou, a woman-centered rite found in Beti culture. Within the film, Mevougou takes on a variety of meanings and forms. The opening of the film includes voiceover narration which introduces the mysterious concept to viewers. As the female narrator explains:

Mevougou is neither a living being nor a thing. Mevougou is not a place...much less a moment. Mevougou is neither a desire nor a state of mind. Because Mevougou is something we see and experience but cannot quite define. You don't decide to see Mevougou. Mevougou appears to you. Mevougou invites itself. Like on that day in 2025 in this country. Mevougou cast its spell on us. (*Les Saignantes*)

Here Bekolo carefully positions Mevougou as an ethereal, supernatural force with a will independent of human intervention. It is not the film's protagonists who decide to ‘use’ Mevougou for their own devices; rather, this force possesses the women in order to carry out a unique mission — cleansing the country of corruption. The film's diegesis follows the women as

they navigate various hostile spaces within a corrupt postcolonial state. Moreover, the power afforded through Mevougou allows the women to effectively infiltrate and cleanse spaces inhospitable to black women's bodies.

As it is represented in the film, Mevougou allows the women to consume the life force of others in much the same way as mythical vampires draw energy and sustenance from their hosts. The protagonists' vampiric qualities are represented as emanating from Mevougou, which takes various forms, including an embodied organization, supernatural force, revolutionary movement, and state of being. Mevougou is anthropologically documented as a pre-colonial female-exclusive rite within Beti culture in Cameroon that privileges women's sexual potency as balance-restoring. Focused on invoking a supernatural power linked to the clitoris, the customs and rituals associated with Mevougou are intended to repair a dying society ruined by corruption. Bekolo frames his use of the concept within the film thus:

Such forces could be positive and they could be negative. But my idea was that maybe our solution lies in a group like Mevougou... In Cameroon, the solution to all the problems seems to be the World Bank. And things are getting worse. So we need to look at things differently, maybe someone starting up and saying it differently. ("The Challenges of Aesthetic Populism: An Interview with Jean-Pierre Bekolo" 10)

As it is portrayed in the film, Mevougou and its focus on female-centered sexual energy is meant to counterbalance the destruction created by misguided nationalist agendas. While careful not to frame Mevougou — and his female characters — as a cure-all for the postcolonial state, they are positioned as agents whose supernatural vampiric powers allow them to create a more ethical and egalitarian Cameroonian society.

As Mathew Omelsky points out in “Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s African Cyborgian Thought,” Bekolo destabilizes Mevougou from singular cultural meanings. Instead, the filmmaker “samples and cites this ancient rite, giving it a new shape to fit his new world and new anatomy” (13). No elaborate explanations are provided for which roles each character plays in the Mevougou ritual. In fact, no clear ritual is performed from start to finish as it would occur traditionally in Beti culture. Instead, Mevougou is represented in fragmentary and fluid ways with no stable meaning to ground it. In this sense, it is adapted for a contemporary context and audience. For example, Majolie is forced to drink a liquid traditionally linked to the Mevougou ritual out of a martini glass. Elsewhere, ChouChou’s mother, a character also represented as a Mevougou priestess, communicates with her daughter via a cell phone. Within the context of the film, this pre-colonial tradition is stripped of any ‘authentic’ markers that might propose a return to an Edenic pre-modern Africa.

Mevougou is adapted and integrated into a hybridized force that transcends any categorization of it as either pre-or post-modern. In the film, the decadent and corrupted state of Bekolo’s fictional country calls for Mevougou’s healing intervention to rebuild it. Unbeknownst to them, the main female protagonists are possessed by Mevougou as the spirit of the secret society takes over their bodies and pushes them towards a social mission. The power of Mevougou provides the female protagonists Majolie (Adele Ado) and ChouChou (Dorelia Calmel) with vampiric qualities to ‘drain’ corrupt postcolonial officials of their power.

Drawing from the mythos of the vampire allows Bekolo to both critique the present state of African politics and critique representations of African women as powerful/powerless, clean/infected, dangerous/passive, and consumable/consumptive. Throughout the film, the protagonists are represented with traditional vampiric qualities like their mode of operating at

night, their physical appearance (youthful and sensual), and their ability to take the life force of others. However, *les saignantes* are also portrayed as positive agents of change rather than the blood-sucking parasites of classical vampire lore. Instead, their goal is to kill representatives of the corrupt nation-state (i.e. the SGCC and Minister of State) by draining them of their power. For example, the film closes with a showdown between the two protagonists and the Minister of State. It is in this encounter that we see how vampiric qualities are foundational to Bekolo's protagonists' role as agents of change in their society.

In a choreographed fight scene reminiscent of the 1999 sci-fi film, *The Matrix*, Majolie and ChouChou battle the Minister of State. As a Vodou adept, the Minister of State attempts to control and subdue the women by projecting a violent force toward them, which is represented in the film as a smoke-like face. In response, the protagonists conjure the power of Mevougou deep within their bodies and propel it toward the Minister of State. As the force of Mevougou exits their bodies, it enters the body of the Minister of State, sucking out his life force. The scene ends with the Minister of State collapsed on the ground, dead. With this scene, Bekolo demonstrates how his female characters' vampirism provides them with the necessary tools to 'devour' or 'drain' the corrupt elite of its power.

The fulfillment of the protagonists' mission to reconstruct the postcolonial state is also framed through the imagery of blood and bloodletting. Indeed, the title of the film, *Les Saignantes*, means 'cruel women' or 'those predisposed to inflict pain,' which aligns neatly with the mission that Majolie and Chouchou must perform: the killing of corrupt government officials. The theme of vampirism and bloodletting invites us to translate the French title, *Les Saignantes*, in a variety of ways, including *The Bloodletters*, *The Bleeders*, or *The Bloodettes*. While the original title in French is apt, the current English title, *The Bloodettes*, draws a parallel

between the imagery of blood and women, as demonstrated through the suffix “ette.” In an interview, Bekolo himself suggests that *Les Saignantes* be translated as *The Bleeders*, but concedes that there are challenges with translating the title. In my reading, I argue that his final choice of *The Bloodettes* suggests a link between the film’s protagonists and vampire lore.

If African women are typically portrayed as perpetual victims of gendered violence (clitoridectomy, infibulation, marital and corrective rape, etc.), pathology (HIV/AIDS), and excessive reproduction, then Bekolo’s film seeks to question such representations. In the film, political power is articulated through patriarchy, which shapes the ways in which political power is illustrated at all social levels. Throughout the film, corrupt male politicians deploy their political power to obtain sexual favors from women. For instance, the Minister of State is portrayed as having a sexual fetish for women’s panties, which is represented as also strengthening ability to fight the protagonists when they use Mevougou against him. While the Minister of State is the most prominent corrupt male figure in the film, Bekolo portrays all male characters as exhibiting various levels of sexism and weakness. Indeed, it is not only men in power who coerce or threaten women sexually in the film. While the protagonists inhabit a world that marks them for death, violation, and dehumanization, they are not devoid of agency. As vampires endowed with power through Mevougou, Bekolo provides his protagonists with the power to subvert masculinist state power and redefine notions of their bodies.

### **Cyborgian Sexuality**

The archetype of the vampire alone does not fully capture Bekolo’s critique of necropower and the corrupt postcolonial nation-state. Bekolo’s structuring of *Les Saignantes* around two female sex workers frames the film as an exploration of gender and sexuality. More specifically, his depiction of two beautiful, young female protagonists with superhuman powers

directly addresses how systems of patriarchy configure knowledge and politics in societies. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe asserts that colonial and postcolonial societies are grounded by “phallic domination.” He writes:

The phallus has been the focus of ways of constructing masculinity and power...Male domination derives in large measure from the power and spectacle of the phallus...from the individual man’s ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of woman and to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself. (13)

In short, masculinity is framed in contradiction to, or opposed to, femininity and women’s bodies. As Matthew Omelsky has noted, the power structures represented in the film closely mirror Mbembe’s concept of a phallogocentric system (“Jean-Pierre’s African Cyborgian Thought” 13). Within the film, the protagonists are consistently placed in dangerous situations where their survival depends on maneuvering through a masculinist political landscape that wants either the possession of women’s bodies or their death. However, it is within this patriarchal and phallogocentric system that Bekolo’s use of the cyborg figure is most potent. Omelsky’s reading of the cyborg as imagery depicting how “body and machine might converge to subvert the phallic political structure” serves as a useful interpretation of how power, gender, and sexuality intersect in the film (17). However, while Omelsky reads the cyborg as subverting phallic domination, I explore how the cyborg is used as a narrative device through which to transcend gender altogether. Through their cyborgian qualities, Bekolo’s protagonists have the tools to not only survive the film’s dystopian landscape but create a more egalitarian future.

If phallogocentric domination structures Bekolo’s dystopian filmic world, then his use of cyborg imagery can be read as an attempt to structure an affirmative female space. In theorizations of cyborg feminism, links between an organic female body, reproduction, and

domesticity are disrupted. Cyborgs are at once transgressive, gender bending, and powerful. Indeed, cyborgian bodies are frequently conceptualized as the locus of transgressive power in society. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway reminds us that “Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception... Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an act of embodiment. The machine is us” (180). As with the vampire figure, the cyborg melds the organic with the inorganic, the human with the inhuman. Whether through superhuman powers or the marvels of technoscience, the cyborg is capable of transcending societal constraints and creating new forms of life.

In reimagining the body as a merger between the organic and inorganic – whether via supernatural force or biotechnological enhancement – Majolie and ChouChou are ideal representations. From the beginning of the film, both protagonists rebel and transcend phallogocentric control. Although the women are portrayed as sex workers, and sexual play and innuendo is pervasive throughout the film, neither protagonist is ever shown in a submissive position. The film opens with a sexual encounter between Majolie and a high-ranking official, known as the SGCC (*Secrétaire General du Cabinet Civil*), in which we first see Bekolo’s use of cyborg imagery. Suspended in a harness over her client, Majolie engages in foreplay that both teases the man and creates a distance between their bodies. While her bodily movements are fluid and sensual, her position in the harness makes her movements rhythmic and almost mechanical. The straps and metal appendages attached to her naked body also make her body appear machine-like. Haraway’s mention of pleasure in “machine skill” is represented here through a manipulative power play between the dominant Majolie her submissive client – a man we later learn is one of the most powerful politicians in the country.

Perched in a dominant position over her client, Majolie thrusts her pelvis in a violent rocking motion that mimics penetration. Inverting the phallogocentric idea of the penis entering or violating a female vagina, Majolie's movements – combined with the imagery of the harness – implies a transcendence not only of traditional gender norms but of gender altogether. Indeed, sexual play between Majolie and the SGCC goes beyond a dualistic feminization of the masculine and vice versa; rather, it illustrates a cyborgian transgression of gender boundaries. After refusing his advances and attempts to touch her body, Majolie's seductive play comes to a climax not through orgasm, but through death. As Majolie slows her thrusting, she sees that her client has suffered cardiac arrest. In this scene, the distinction between eroticism and violence is blurred. Frustrated by the loss of a paying client and unaware of her client's identity, she searches through his wallet to discover his identity as the SGCC. In this scene, the symbolic violence of Majolie's cyborgian movements has translated into the literal killing of a man who symbolizes the nation's body politic. In replacing orgasm with death, Bekolo illustrates how the film's cyborgian protagonists cannot be easily categorized as simply 'female'; rather, they have transgressed gender boundaries to become weapons. Indeed, while both Omelsky and Diabate read the protagonists' sexuality as inherently linked to their womanhood via sexual agency, I assert that their eroticism cannot be so easily gendered. The protagonists' eroticism is best read as a weapon through which violence is exercised rather than as an inherent aspect of their femininity.

As cyborgs and vampires, Majolie and ChouChou are perfectly positioned to survive in a dystopia characterized by violence, consumption, and death. In the film, the female narrator highlights the condition of Bekolo's imagined society by informing the viewer that "We were already dead." Later, the narrator reinforces this point by rhetorically asking "How does one

recognize Mevougou from others in this country where it's impossible to separate the living from the dead?" In Bekolo's landscape, all forms of life are senseless and obscene and it is impossible to distinguish the living from the dead. However, as cyborgs and vampires, the protagonists use death to their advantage. Indeed, the women have substantially more agency than many other characters in the film, who are largely represented as zombie-like, impotent, and apathetic. It is to this reading of the zombie in *Les Saignantes* that I now turn.

### **Bekolo's Zombified Male Citizenry**

While in the Western imagination, zombie imagery calls attention to white anxiety concerning racial outsiders consuming resources, challenging white racial superiority, and polluting genealogical bloodlines, Bekolo situates this figure as a critique of power in the postcolonial African state. The landscape in *Les Saignantes* is reminiscent of a post-apocalyptic setting – the entire film takes place at night, and shots of abandoned streets and dilapidated housing structures is reminiscent of war-ravaged spaces. In Bekolo's futuristic African state, degeneration and stagnation has created a population that mirrors the landscape – they are immobile, degenerate, and portrayed as the 'living dead.' This is particularly true for Bekolo's male characters. Indeed, each male character – from a taxi driver to the Minister of State – highlights how the corrupt postcolonial state physically and metaphorically consumes its population in a similar manner to Mbembe's concept of "mutual zombification." *Les Saignantes'* male characters are conceptualized as zombified, made inhuman through the negligence and violence of the African nation-state. The lack of necessary social services (guaranteed police protection, equitable healthcare, a democratic political system, etc.), widespread unemployment, poverty, and corruption that characterize Bekolo's 'fictional' society create an uncanny blend of dystopian nightmare and reality.

More so than female characters in film, *Les Saignantes*' male characters are represented as zombie-like. They are frequently unable to move or speak; instead, they stammer, vomit, produce guttural sounds, and even eat the flesh of other humans. In my reading of the film, I assert that the zombification of the film's male characters highlights the exercise of postcolonial authority. To again return to this chapter's epigraph, Bekolo rhetorically asks "How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden?" Two of the film's supporting characters – a senior officer and rookie policeman – are portrayed as inept and unable to enact any form of social change. Bekolo's use of the young policeman — named Rokko (played by Alain Dzukam Simo) — demonstrates how even those who attempt to act on behalf of the population's wellbeing are powerless to fight an endemically corrupt system. Unlike other male characters in this film, Rokko's moral compass is outweighed only by an idealistic loyalty to the law. However, as his aging, disillusioned superior, Inspector Essomba, explains, upholding the law in a corrupt state is an exercise in futility. At many points in the film, Rokko's naive attempts to improve social wellbeing by upholding the law undermine his own authority and reinforce the power of corrupt government bureaucrats like the Minister of State. His naivety also makes him susceptible to manipulation from female characters who, at one point in the film, steal his gun and later use Mevougou to transport him from one location in the city to another.

Near the end of the film, Rokko finally recognizes his powerlessness and, rather than confront those responsible – the corrupt elite – for his society's dilapidated state, he places blame on the protagonists. In one scene, Rokko confronts the protagonists with the assertion that Cameroon must become a "model with institutions that everyone respects." Majolie's retort challenges the efficacy of a largely corrupt and zombified (male) police force to improve the country: "What have you done for this country? Me, I paid with my body and my ass." While

Rokko calls on ‘institutions’ to correct the nation’s endemic corruption, Majolie’s comment highlights that institutions are not based on justice or the law; rather, they are built on the commodification of women’s bodies. With this exchange, Bekolo highlights that knowingly or unknowingly, all men are complicit in the construction of a patriarchal, violent socio-political system that zombifies its citizens. In a society caught in a vicious cycle of destruction, tools of state law enforcement like guns and police officers have become useless symbols of a demobilized system.

After the SGCC’s death during intercourse, Majolie and ChouChou decide to dispose of his body by marketing it to a butcher as a “load of fresh meat, prime beef.” Although the protagonists try to engage him in conversation, the butcher to whom the SGCC’s body is delivered for dismemberment does not appear to be capable of speech. Rather, he exhibits zombie-like qualities – jerky, inhuman movements, guttural sounds, and cannibalistic tendencies. As if stripped of his linguistic abilities, the butcher’s preferred mode of communication is through aggressive movements and growling sounds to reply in the affirmative and advancing with a rusty chainsaw when he disapproves. Cutting a piece of flesh off of the SGCC’s body, the butcher tastes the ‘meat.’ Surprisingly, the butcher recognizes the SGCC’s body by tasting it. Aware that he is in possession of the SGCC, the butcher proceeds to sever the head and testicles from the trunk.

In Bekolo’s use of cyborg imagery, women’s sexuality plays a significant role in undermining what Mbembe calls “phallic domination.” In his representation of a zombified male citizenry in the African postcolony, Bekolo again returns to the theme of phallic domination. However, while the cyborg undermines phallic domination through transgressive forms of sexuality - including death and castration - the zombie disrupts it through decapitation and

cannibalism. Emasculation and impotency are thus central characteristics of Bekolo's zombified male citizenry, and the castration of a figure who represents the body politic – the SGCC – is a direct critique of the performance of power within the postcolonial African state. While the castration of the SGCC's testicles highlights a gendered critique of the corrupt postcolonial body politic, the decapitation and cannibalization of the SGCC's body calls attention to the zombification of male citizens in the postcolony.

Mbembe's concept of mutual zombification can be brought into conversation with other transnational and transcultural iterations of this archetypal figure. In one sense, Bekolo's zombified male characters echo the classic Haitian zombie as a figure absent of "will, memory, and emotion" due to their inability to act, impotence, and limited speaking capabilities (*Vampires and Zombies* 60). These male characters do not exhibit the types of qualities found in recent Western zombie figurations - that of brainless, flesh-eating hyper-aggressive monsters. Rather, Bekolo's zombies reenact the master-slave relationship found in traditional zombie narratives with one exception - there is no visible 'master' figure from which orders are derived. Instead, male characters are represented as zombified due to the conditions within which they live. While the Butcher character appears closest to the cannibalistic monster form of the zombie popularized in the global imaginary, Bekolo's zombified male citizenry exhibit qualities that are uniquely suited to the symptoms of 'living' in the African postcolony.

Castrated, cannibalistic, and unable to act, Bekolo's male characters are truly the living dead. In Bekolo's dystopia, the postcolonial African state's zombified, vampiric, and cyborgian citizens rid their society of a corrupt system by marking the elite body for death. While male characters embody the more passive facilitators of endemic corruption in the postcolonial African state, Bekolo's vampiric and cyborgian protagonists are given the power to dismantle

this corruption. Although the film ends with an ambivalent tone concerning what type of future can be built in the wake of such profound and systemic corruption, *Les Saignantes*' political message undoubtedly points toward a cautiously hopeful future.

### **Conclusion**

In *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo paints a disturbingly familiar picture of a postcolonial city characterized where morbidity, violence, and corruption have become the status quo of state governance. As the film nears its denouement, the narrator reminds us that “The country could not continue...without a future. It had to change.” This change is embodied in Majolie and ChouChou, Bekolo's vampiric and cyborgian protagonists. As a political narrative situated within a speculative framework, *Les Saignantes* invents a different semiotic to critique the failures of decolonization. In “Welcome to Applied Fiction,” Bekolo explains his decision to use a speculative narrative scheme rather than documentary-style filmmaking, claiming: “The challenge is to create a new language, a new semantic to talk about these things. The moment we create a new semantic, we will be able to speak properly” (“Welcome to Applied Fiction” 9). By grafting the tropes of the cyborg, vampire, and zombie onto the bodies of fictional characters living in postcolonial Africa, Bekolo comes into conversation with Mbembe and imagines potential ways we can begin to create new semantics that privilege women's role in shaping a new postcolonial Africa.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD GLOBAL BLACK FEMALE FUTURES

In a 2016 TedX Copenhagen talk entitled “Re-imagine the Future,” self-proclaimed ‘futurist’ and near-future technology designer, Angela Oguntala, asserts that actualizations of the future are based upon *who* is doing the thinking. For her, imagination can inspire change only when people can envision themselves in another space. For Oguntala, this is especially true for communities of color around the world. Citing Caribbean sci-fi, the 2015 Ethiopian space program and Kenya’s digitized form of money exchange, M-PESA, Oguntala points to speculative stories as the main drive behind real-world change. While talking into a watch might have started with 1950’s American sci-fi film plots, its effect on the popular imagination inspired science fiction to become a reality. By looking at stories that ask ‘What if?’, communities can strive towards changing our local and global environments together. In Oguntala’s words, “When we choose to be curious about the future and take them seriously, we’ll start to think in new ways, solve problems in new ways and see possibilities we couldn’t see before” (2016).

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the works I examine directly new possibilities of the future through imaginative frameworks that critique forms of socio-cultural ordering that affect the lives of black women around the world. While the speculative imagery used by these artists and filmmakers is far from celebratory, it does offer new ways to deconstruct and reinvent social constructs like race and gender. Using the theoretical, textual, and filmic explorations examined here, I make the case that speculative and science fiction is currently being used as a medium through which to radically reinvent the types of representation available for black women. Moreover, the futures conceptualized in these works provide a refreshing perspective on how gender and race are being re-conceptualized transnationally in

ways that create new diasporic communities. As these futuristic representations expand their reach through increasingly globalized forms of data sharing, one hopes that popular perceptions about black cultural production can be rebooted, so to speak.

Although names like Wanuri Kahiu and Wangechi Mutu might have been foreign within popular discourse prior to 2000, new modes of distribution and discussions such as TedX talks, YouTube, blog posts, and Twitter are quickly popularizing black futurists and their works. The more popularized and accessible forms of discourse – especially Twitter and YouTube – in combination with other forms of cultural production, are key to understanding the roles black women see themselves occupying as they work toward improving their present and future. Their imaginings also challenge us to reconsider what theorizing looks like, and reflect on widening the geographical scope of black women’s theoretical discourse.

The works discussed in this study are diverse in their representations of black women in the future, in terms of both content and medium. The issues that continually surface address explorations of power in relation to black women’s bodies – especially the complicated relationship of diasporic subject formation; epistemological shifts that take place in the wake of widespread ecological devastation; and the gendered body politics of African nation-states. Postcolonial histories, the politics of migratory practices, and environmental discourses are the contexts that allow authors and filmmakers to find entry into fantastical worlds here on Earth, in alternate dimensions, and across the galaxy. The archetypal imagery that takes shape in these works – zombies, vampires, cyborgs, anthropomorphic creatures, and black female superhumans – all contribute to the destabilization of norms and social constructs that frequently limit the types of subject positions available to black women.

My dissertation has traced three main tensions that are prevalent in postcolonial and black women's discourses of difference. The first is the impact of ecological abuse on women's lives in a transcontinental context. The second tension involves the transgression of national boundaries (i.e. immigration, diaspora, increases in refugee and displaced populations). The third and final tension includes exploitative gender relations within the postcolonial African context (i.e. postcolonial and neocolonial power structures, women's role in framing nationalist discourse). Within the context of my dissertation chapters, each of these three tensions is elaborated through archetypal imagery typically associated with the speculative and science fiction genres. In my reading of Wangechi Mutu's *The End of eating Everything* and Ibi Zoboi's "The Farming of the Gods," anthropomorphic creatures are used to highlight the impact of climate change and ecological abuse on black women. Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* illustrate how the superhero/superheroine trope provides a framework through which to reimagine the transgression of national boundaries – especially in relation to migration and diaspora. Finally, exploitative gender relations within the postcolonial African state are examined in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* through the figures of the zombie, cyborg, and vampire. Through my reading of these archetypal figures, I examine how black authors and filmmakers are currently using the speculative to theorize about black women's subjectivity.

The guiding framework for this dissertation lies in the dialogic relationship between speculative and science fiction and contemporary black women's theoretical discourses of difference. In my opening chapter, "Theorizing Black Women's Futures," I draw from Barbara Christian's argument on inventive forms of theory production as well as Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi's claim that African women should be separated from gender roles to create "unique

spheres, spaces, and locations” for women's identities (24). When read in conversation, speculative and science fiction and black women’s theoretical frameworks open new ways of conceptualizing issues of difference, globalization, and identity that increasingly impact black women’s lives globally. Furthermore, both examine and contest boundaries, definitions of bodies, and socio-cultural territories. Ultimately, I contend that the collection of primary works found in this dissertation point toward a larger trend of using speculative and science fiction as a tool of theoretical critique of existing power relations.

Redressing political and social issues is at the heart of the works I discuss. My decision to focus on the body was challenging, since it came with various limitations and possibilities. Undoubtedly, these texts and films reveal that black women’s bodies can be typecast in ways that objectify, overdetermine, and reduce black womanhood to second-class citizenship. However, just like the rebellious and otherworldly female characters in the primary works discussed in this dissertation, women’s bodies can also be used to inscribe resistance to repressive forms of state-mandated violence, nationalist discourse, and ecological abuse. The material conditions found in many of these fictional narratives force us to consider what it means to create spaces of resistance.

The goals of this study are multilayered and intricate. First, I have attempted to find intersections between multiple overlapping – and sometimes competing – discourses to show black women in their diversity and to demonstrate how archetypal figures are used to disrupt fixed assumptions about their identities and bodies. Unlike anthropological analyses, historical texts or political pamphlets, these speculative narratives and films invite us into spaces where no other cultural product can take us. Their potential for larger circulation via the futurist cultural movement demands that we examine the images they show about transcontinental Pan-African

societies. If nothing else, the futurist fiction currently being produced demands that black women be represented in their wholeness. By portraying women's bodies in discrete, fragmented, bionic, and even mutilated parts, these works call attention to how black women are frequently categorized as a product rather than producers. The holistic approaches depicted via these texts and films illustrate how black women negotiate the space between empowerment and objectification.

The use of monstrous, otherworldly, and superhuman black female bodies in these works also attempts to dispel discomfort concerning black female sexualities and corporeality. I argue that using a popular fictional genre like speculative and science fiction as a vehicle through which to facilitate conversation about complex images of black women's bodies adds depth to how they are seen globally. While many women in locations like Africa do face serious problems, their experiences, identities, and sexualities can hardly be reduced to these issues. Moreover, imaginative narratives provide a creative space to discuss these issues in a way that transcends and works around the legal, political, and economic jargon typically associated with commentary on these social and health issues.

Perhaps the most common thread associated with reimagining the future for black writers and filmmakers – including Wanuri Kahiu, Nnedi Okorafor, and even *Black Panther*'s Danai Gurira – is a passion for storytelling. Indeed, the theme of storytelling as a medium for changing popular opinion is central to each futurist story and film I have examined in this dissertation. Storytelling, for many Pan-African authors and filmmakers, is a way for black people worldwide to see their dreams actualized. In short, speculative forms of storytelling take inspiration from a variety of global influences while still speaking to the issues relevant to populations in those localities.

While many of the stories examined here have illustrated bleak and desolate futures for black people generally, and black women in particular, whether via a genetically altered superheroine as in *The Book of Phoenix* or an explosion of jubilant talking heads as in *The End of eating Everything*, the female protagonists in these works are consistently illustrated as cautiously hopeful for a better future. Their characters represent complex forms of social commentary, weapons against abusive forms of state power, and genetically engineered vessels through which to re-conceptualize diasporic identity. While the characters created by these authors and filmmakers may be fictional, their stories have the power to change both our global socio-cultural landscape as well as the lives of individuals in search of an affirmative and inclusive future.

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