

TRAVELING DISCOURSES:  
SUBJECTIVITY, SPACE AND SPIRITUALITY IN BLACK WOMEN'S  
SPECULATIVE FICTIONS IN THE AMERICAS

DISSERTATION

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By

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## ABSTRACT

The diverse arenas of African American literary criticism, speculative fiction, and academia in general have historically operated to marginalize, respectively, the critical contributions, artistic works, and theoretical engagement of black women. If as historian Robin Kelley asserts, "the marginal and excluded have done the most to make democracy work in America," then I extend that claim to suggest that marginality, particularly when rearticulated as a position of liminality, offers powerful critical perspective on contemporary and historical issues. Ultimately, it imagines different possibilities for the future of not only oppressed people, but for all people. In response to this tradition of marginalization, I extend critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality to develop an interpretive frame that I term multiply liminal discourse. Multiply liminal discourse engages various so-called marginal aspects of social/political positioning. It allows the simultaneous analysis of converging aspects of identity as each one informs the other and posits this interplay as a liminal, rather than marginal, position of power from which important socio-cultural critique might be made and radical visions of the future imagined.

This project employs multiply liminal discourse through the multiple marginal-cum-liminal positionings of black female subjectivity, black Diasporic space, and African spiritual epistemologies through the academically marginalized/liminal medium of speculative fiction. By examining various black women writers of speculative fictions

from various parts of the Americas—Brazil, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States—I establish the shared position of black female liminality and African epistemological frames of reference while remaining attendant to the particulars of difference generated by varied historical developments in African diasporic spaces.

The examinations of the works within this text, utilizing multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive methodology, reveal the potential for enactment of "strategic essentialism" toward an integrated theoretical and practical liberatory discourse and politics. This occurs within the texts through reclaiming agency for black womanhood and black romantic relationships in *Aline França's A Mulher de Aleduma*; embracing black heritage particularly through one of the most demonized cultural legacies, African spirituality, in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*; and the expansive and inclusive vision of liberation ideology that embraces difference and change through Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. This manuscript concludes by discussing the integration of ideology and activism through multiply liminal discourse and the ways in which speculative fiction enables that integration.

To my family

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## CHAPTER 1

### **ALWAYS ALREADY ALIEN: THE CASE OF BLACK WOMEN WRITING SPECULATIVE FICTIONS**

*"...what I refused to give up was my essence; nor could I. For it was simply this: I do not share their vision of reality, but have, and cherish, my own."*

~The Character of Lissie Lyles, *The Temple of My Familiar*

Black literature has long acted as a political and ideological tool by which black folk have imagined and reimagined the social and political implications of history, of contemporary issues, and of future worlds that enact liberation and/or transcend oppressions. The political dimension of these works can be articulated as the literary enactment of the spirit of social liberation movements. Much of black literature works to articulate black subjectivity and experience, and to affect change through raising consciousness and awareness of a distinctively black perspective, if not aesthetic, that is ultimately political in its implications. Black women's speculative fiction, the genre upon which this project focuses, certainly attends to the social and political ramifications of dreaming new futures for black folk within the Americas as a response to hegemonic and oppressive cultural trends that threaten not only black women, but all of humankind.

Each text engaged in this project reveals black<sup>1</sup> women's African spiritual<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As with any comparative project, differences must be respected in the ways in which cultures articulate their subjective understandings of themselves. And certainly, in the United States, as well as in Brazil, the debate over naming of people of African heritage has shifted over time, with consensus being reached for a period of time until the next intellectual or social movement challenges the previous terms. One of the assumptions of this project is that, regardless of whatever the current politics of naming may dictate, there exists in the Americas a people of African descent who, by virtue of the shared historical experience of

epistemological<sup>3</sup> framings, which re-orient the genre known as speculative fiction, and explore the limits and transcendent possibilities engendered by the combined motivational forces of liberation and love as radical politics.

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slavery, social experience of oppression, and political sense of identity based in African origins, are constitutive of a shared sensibility. There was a time when the Brazilian context might have complicated this assertion, but today we witness, in the legacy of the Movimento Negro do Brasil, a consciousness and assertion of black identity in struggle against disguised forms of racism, oppression and hegemony in the garment of the nationally embraced discourse of racial democracy (Hanchard). Through the activism of militant African-Brazilian intellectuals, artists, and writers, the myth of racial democracy in Brazil has been largely debunked in academic circles, and permits the cross-cultural analysis of black literatures in these regions. As such, I use the terms "Black" to indicate the broad-reaching scope of the condition of African-descended people around the globe generally and "African Diasporic" to identify the particular situation of African-descended people in the Americas within the scope of this project.

<sup>2</sup> For some, the question may arise as to the use of the term "spiritual" rather than terms that reference "folk" or "folk religion," which are more widely understood terms in academic and literary contexts. While the function of folklore as a field of study attempts "to make tradition and belief respectable as grounds of knowledge in an academic world based on Enlightenment principles of rationality," (Motz 348) and introduces a methodology that "enables us to examine important aspects of culture that otherwise eludes a scholarly grasp," (Motz 340) there is a sense of folk culture and the study of folklore as generally apolitical. One of the major rifts in the Movimento Negro in Brasil is between the culturalists, who focus on the valorization of African cultural production, and the activists whose primary concern is with social and political activism (Crook and Johnson 3). Even though this assessment is not true in all instances, I prefer to posit the spiritual as a concept that, like folklore, makes belief respectable as grounds of knowledge and allows us to examine critical aspects of culture that otherwise eludes scholarly grasp, but which also infuses an explicit political and social concern with broader social processes. Thus, when Robin Kelley asserts that "freedom and love constitute the foundation for spirituality, another elusive and intangible force with which few scholars of social movements have come to terms" (12), John Powell's work theorizing the relationship between spirituality and social justice bridges the gap between the spiritual foundational forces of love and freedom and their power to effect transformative social politics. Powell suggests that social practices and arrangements "currently institutionalize power which causes subjugation and suffering" (103) and that "if one of the foci of spirituality is to engage suffering and its causes," then spirituality must also be concerned with social institutions and structures (103-104). Thus, the notion of the spiritual operates not merely as an individual (ontological) and cultural (epistemological) position, but as a social and political act that demands consideration of people's connectedness. As Powell suggests, "how we think about our connectedness has important implications for our spiritual and social practices and the way we imagine our social arrangements" (112).

<sup>3</sup> The notion of African spiritual epistemology is an offshoot of Patricia Hill Collins' articulations of a more general Afrocentric feminist epistemology in the essay "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." She argues that "in spite of varying histories, Black societies reflect elements of a core African value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression" as well as a common experience of racialized oppression that manifests a similarity in material conditions. These commonalities foster shared Afrocentric values that "permeate the family structure, religious institutions, culture and community life" of blacks all over the Diaspora (755). My terminology reflects focused attention to the African spiritual (religious institutions) resonances as the basis for a common black feminine perspective throughout this project.

Robin Kelley's analysis of radical social movements provides the social-intellectual impetus for the consideration of love and freedom as radical political engagement. He asserts:

Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance. Despite having spent a decade and a half writing about radical social movements, I am only just beginning to see what animated, motivated, and knitted together these gatherings of aggrieved folk. I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that freedom and love constitute the foundation for spirituality, another elusive and intangible force with which few scholars of social movements have come to terms. These insights were always there in the movements I've studied, but I was unable to see it, acknowledge it, or bring it to the surface. I hope this little book might be a beginning. (Kelley 12)

Certainly, for me, Kelley's insights have provided a beginning for me to consider the ways in which black women's speculative fiction and its interpretation function as a kind of radical literary/social liberation movement for liberation.<sup>4</sup>

The diverse arenas of African American literary criticism, speculative fiction, and academia in general have historically operated to marginalize, respectively, the critical contributions, artistic works, and theoretical engagement of black women. If as Robin Kelley asserts, "the marginal and excluded have done the most to make democracy work in America," (xi) then I extend that claim to suggest that black women speculative writers' position of marginality, particularly when rearticulated as a position of liminality,

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<sup>4</sup> Both love and liberation are broad and nebulous terms, even when considered independently. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on the liberation aspect of Kelley's hypothesis. The notion of love, while it is beginning to be theorized as a political act, presents a number of contested issues that are beyond the scope of this project. bell hooks' "Loving Blackness as a Radical Political Act" and Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* offer a beginning for the theorization of love, however, and may provide important critical grounds for exploration in a later project.

offers powerful critical perspective on contemporary and historical issues and towards imagining different possibilities for the future of not only oppressed people, but for all people. In response to this tradition of marginalization, I extend Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality<sup>5</sup> to develop an interpretive frame that I term multiply liminal discourse. I propose the term “liminal” in opposition to “marginal” to emphasize the possibility of resistance inherent in the term, stemming from a betwixt and between location. The notion of marginality constantly references a center to which the outsider, typically the oppressed, is always peripherally situated—a position of perpetual powerlessness that reifies the hegemonic center. The notion of liminality offers spaces from which subversive power might be exercised. The adverbial form “multiply” modifies the term liminal to suggest the shifting, dynamic interstitial spaces wherein the subject may reside at any given point in time and circumstance. The coupling of these terms generates a discourse that engages various subjective liminal aspects of social/political/theoretical positioning. It allows the simultaneous analysis of converging aspects of identity—or points of identification—as each one informs the other and posits this interplay as a liminal, rather than marginal, position of power from which important socio-cultural critique might be made and radical visions of the future imagined through speculative fiction.

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<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality primarily references the ways in which feminist and anti-racist discourses operate to obscure the interplay of intersecting identities of race, gender and sexuality in the experience of oppression(s) (1244). My notion of multiply liminal discourse extends intersectionality beyond the subjective experience to include liminal positionalities, or spaces, that the intersectional subject—or multiply liminal subject—might occupy. Thus, multiple liminality indicates not only intersectional subjectivity, but the liminal spaces in which the intersectional subject dwells from which counterhegemonic discourse is generated.

This project employs multiply liminal discourse through the interlaced positionings of black female subjectivity, black Diasporic space, and African spiritual epistemologies through the academically marginalized/liminal space of speculative fiction. By examining various black women writers of speculative fictions from various parts of the Americas—Brazil, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States—I establish the shared position of black female liminality and African epistemological frames of reference while remaining attendant to the particulars of difference generated by varied historical developments in African diasporic spaces. This dissertation examines black women's speculative fictions in the Americas to reveal new generic modes generated by the frame of multiply liminal discourse and to identify a common counterhegemonic discourse that rejects victim status and articulates a resiliency of power not readily recognized from a mainstream perspective. Therefore, rather than defining yet another limiting category that would only serve to reify the old patterns of (ab)use of genre, I propose an interpretive frame that generates operative terms from the specificity of each text and identify points of comparison on the basis of that specificity. The examinations of the works within this text, utilizing multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive methodology, reveal the potential for enactment of "strategic essentialism" toward an integrated theoretical and practical liberatory discourse and politics.

The following sections of this chapter elucidate the specific genre of black speculative fiction and how it distinguishes itself from mainstream speculative fiction. It goes on to more fully articulate the concept of multiply liminal discourse as an enabling interpretive framework for black speculative fiction. Analysis of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* demonstrates how the frame expands the bounds of traditional

characterizations of speculative fiction. The chapter concludes by discussing the specific conditions surrounding the social/historical/cultural production of speculative literatures by black women in each region then provides synopses of the following chapters.

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### **Black Speculative Fiction and the Problem of Genre**

Speculative fiction is a broad-ranging cover term for works operating within what I call the conditional clause—i.e., as works that reveal insights into the possibility of what *could* have happened, or what might occur *if* certain social/political/historical conditions, usually taken for granted in the present time, were different or were to change. They may take place in the future or the past and implicitly or explicitly challenge current social norms and alleged historical truths, employing a number of (frequently alienating, when combined) literary conventions and tools stemming from various genres to communicate their message. Works operating within the conditional clause can include, but are not limited to, elements found within the mainstream categories of science fiction (usually futuristic or polytemporal and incorporating science and technology), alternative histories (if something were to change in history that would affect the present dramatically), and fantasy (to encompass those texts that deal with occurrences that fall outside the realm of "reality"). The category of speculative fiction loosely binds these various genres together in an effort to articulate a commonality of function.

The expansive genre of speculative fiction offers flexibility in the creation of new generic forms, which perfectly suits the black speculative expressions engaged in this project precisely because speculative criticism constantly engages its own definitions and

redefinitions. It is an inherent aspect of the critical inquiry surrounding it. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria's *Speculations on Speculation* provides an intellectual history of the speculation fiction genre and the various attempts over time that move towards an elucidation, if not definition, of the genre. For the purposes of this project, I embrace Gunn's assertion that "[speculative fiction] is the literature of change, the literature of anticipation, the literature of the human species, the literature of speculation and more" (xi). Through this definition, speculative fiction provides a liminal home for black women's works as they simultaneously resist more traditional classifications of science fiction and foster the more forward, expansive articulations of the category of speculative fiction.

In Black speculative fiction especially, the subcategories that traditionally have been considered distinct genres collide, creating fused—and at times confusing—fluid forms. For example, magic realism and science fiction<sup>6</sup> are traditionally distinct categories whose operational elements are at ideological odds; yet the writing of the authors examined in this project fuses these genres together to create new generic forms.<sup>7</sup> Another distinct contribution that the speculative genre offers for black writers lies in its assessment of historical and present circumstances to issue a warning about the present that we are living in and the future world that we are, now, in the process of creating. However, Black speculative fiction, in its articulation of the conditional clause, does not call into question the epistemological frame as conditional (that is, whether the strange

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<sup>6</sup> The more traditional argument within speculative criticism engages the clash between science fiction and fantasy; magic realism steps outside the bounds of speculation, typically considered a more mainstream literary category. Therefore, the elision of magic realism and science fiction creates further disruption to rigid categorizations.

<sup>7</sup> I will expand this discussion later in the chapter.



"magical realistic" events occurring within the text really could be true); rather, it interrogates the potential social ramifications for societies that have ignored the immediacy of environmental and social concerns, and abused, dismissed, or marginalized sectors of their populations. I will return to this distinction later in my discussion of how speculative conventions re-form magic realism.

An analysis of how genre operates in this project is crucial to understanding the significance of multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive frame. I identify two modes for understanding how genre operates: 1) the traditional definitive function, wherein literary forms are boxed into specific categories with explicit criteria and 2) the emergent understanding of genre as a means of exploring communicative possibilities within texts. The distinction relates to the way text informs genre and vice versa. In the former instance, already established (frequently rigid) understandings of genre precede and therefore define the production of the literary text. In the latter instance, the literary work generates generic articulation to render more fluid interpretive practices. Multiply liminal discourse operates out of the latter notion of genre wherein more apt definitions and interpretive practices arise from the text.

The traditional idea of genres as definitive forms that follow particular rules has been one of the hegemonic positions of Western literary criticism that results in the banishment of women writers, black writers, and others from the literary canon (Baccolini 14). This definitive function positions genres as guardians of literary production, the gatekeepers of iconized literary traditions, and the standard by which literary production is measured (Pereira 875). The strategy of many early black writers, therefore, focused on proper form, style, and convention as dictated by this understanding

of genre to assert the equality and viability of black writers through their capacity to command the literary arts in this manner (Gates 347). However, as black writers began to resist assimilationist positions, various modes of black writing emerged in direct opposition to the mainstream assumption of their inferiority that claims a distinct presence and voice from writers in the mainstream literary traditions (Joyce 379). As Abiola Irele argues:

The current interest in the folk origins of African-American literature and the possible resources offered by an oral tradition in Black America is related... to the need to define the distinctive character of this literature... At the same time, it prompts the question as to whether there exists a link between the literature of the Black Diaspora and African literature in its indigenous inspiration. (Irele 19)

Irele goes on to respond affirmatively to the idea that the literatures of Blacks in Africa and the Diaspora can be linked by a shared sensibility of "a particularized experience—historical, social, and cultural—which gives rise to the sentiment of a distinctive identity" and goes on to cite the example of a shared sensibility in black autobiographical productions (20). These were/are necessary responses to historical negation, and there frequently exists, wherever a European presence has dominated, affirmatively black literatures that resist negation engendered by the traditional understanding of genre.

Recently, however, new literary history has done much to challenge the notion of genres as fixed and autonomous categories, and there now exists an understanding of genre as a means to explore the communicative and interpretive possibilities that arise within the particularity of each text (Campbell and Jamieson, Miller). As contemporary speculative writers "play" with genre, mixing forms and pushing formulaic boundaries, it becomes increasingly crucial to engage these texts as self-theorizing discourse; that is, to

look to the text itself for direction in interpretation. This coincides with the practices in much current black literature and culture, wherein personal experience, or black subjectivity, frequently forms the basis for literary production (Collins 759).<sup>8</sup>

It seems that this current understanding of genres as enablers of interpretive and communicative possibilities provides a more viable method of critique for black literatures. Yet, even with this shift in the understanding of the communicative/interpretive uses of genre, the challenge remains for criticisms to engage the fluidity of genre in the interpretive sense in relation to black speculative texts. This is particularly problematic in the case of black women's speculative literatures in which spiritual, or "otherworldly," elements persist. Black women's speculative fictions, in particular, are ultimately alienating to mainstream audiences in their articulation of an African-based world-sense<sup>9</sup> (i.e., spiritual epistemology) within their literary practices, creating innovative generic practices that pose challenges for literary critics.

Mainstream generic categories offer little by way of engaging those elements peculiar to the texts of black authors which are frequently the manifestation of an African world-sense, and which form an essential and salient basis for literary analysis.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Abiola Irele's work, referenced in this chapter, as well as the work of Houston Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* focus on autobiography; other critics, such as black feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins, argue for the privileging of personal experience in literary and cultural discourse.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "world-sense" in place of the more common term, worldview to reflect a more holistic way of relating to the world through all of the senses as opposed to relating to the world through the singular and limited sensory perception of vision. This is a fundamentally African approach to conceptualizing epistemology promulgated by Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí.

<sup>10</sup> It is my strong sense, in researching the larger genre of speculative fiction, that the subgenres previously listed have been inappropriately appropriated to make them "fit" to a mainstream world-view. If we acknowledge the fundamental epistemological difference that approaching the world utilizing the full range of senses creates, as opposed to limiting them to "sight," these genres must give rise to new nomenclatures that more accurately inform the reading and analysis of black literatures.

Black speculative works engaged in this project infuse existing genres with a spiritual epistemological framing, re-orienting them and foregrounding the significance of the purposes, processes, and epistemologies by which the literature is developed as opposed to the tendency to limit black writing to surface issues of content, theme, and the color of the author. This re-orientation articulates black women's speculative fictions as an alien<sup>11</sup> phenomenon from the related genres from which its characteristics might be derived (science fiction, fantasy, fabulist fiction, and so forth). The notion of the *alien* becomes a trope to characterize the disorienting sense of a spiritual epistemological framing in clash with seemingly contradictory genres utilized in black women's speculative fictions.

Generic fluidity engendered by an African spiritual epistemology, then, is a characteristic of black speculative fiction that requires an interpretive frame arising from the specificity of the text itself. Multiply liminal discourse provides a framework from which to derive the salient aspects of generic development. It provides access to these generic innovations through social, historical, and epistemological inquiry. The following sections elucidate multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive frame and provide an application of it through an analysis of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*.

### **Multiply Liminal Discourse as an Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive frame proposed from the understanding of genre as a means of exploring interpretive possibilities takes as its point of departure the centrality of

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of the "alien" might strike some as counterintuitive if the goal of this work is to create an enabling interpretive frame by which to analyze black women's speculative texts. Would it not be logical to offer terms that de-mystify this difference rather than reiterating it? Certainly, Marleen Barr has suggested that feminist science fiction writers change their generic label to "postmodern feminist fabulation," so that they will no longer be "literary aliens" in the academic establishment (Barr, LIS, 101). However, the so-called position of marginality Barr references is transformed into a position of liminality that, while complex, denies marginalization because it is too different to be ignored. Difference, in fact, is the hallmark of science and speculative fiction that demands our engagement.

subjective experience in the particularity of the text and identifies key elements informing black women's speculative textual production—character subjectivity, diasporic space, and spiritual epistemology. This centering of experience is a multiply liminal subjectivity that I define, in this context, as a diasporic consciousness of being that turns inward. This *diasporic consciousness of being that turns inward* corresponds to Hortense Spillers' engagement with race and psychoanalytic theory, particularly in her assertion of subject formation as a process of “the subject making its mark through the transitivity of reobjectifications, the silent traces of desire on which the object of the subject hinges. This movement across an interior space demarcates the discipline of self-reflection, or the content of self-interrogation that ‘race’ always covers over as an already answered” (582). My conceptualization of multiply liminal discourse decenters race as the concealing “tradition” and rather posits race as that thing that is produced by its own historical and discursive effect, racism. In this context, race becomes less a “fixed subjectivity in a status permanently achieved,” but rather a network of signifiers that are created by and respond to the discursive operations of racism and which simultaneously refers to the intersecting contingencies of difference attendant to the process of becoming in various cultural sites. Multiply liminal discourse represents an opportunity for representing the Self “beyond the given” of race through the consideration of cultural specificity. Thus, a multiply liminal subjectivity focuses on and centers the validity of subjective knowledge produced by the heterogenous mix of tradition and modernity, space and dislocatedness, spiritual and secular, and public and private selves. It takes as its point of departure the cultural, social, and historical locations informing identity and

courts the contradictions inherent in that worldview, placing it in productive tension with speculative literary practices.

This framework, based on the concept of multiple liminality, not only reveals black women's generic innovations, but also engenders a "changed basis" for cross-cultural comparison of literatures by not only black women of diverse cultural backgrounds, but for making international connections as well (Bhabha 6). Multiply liminal discourse operates as a dynamic interpretive frame that *travels*, i.e. that moves and changes with the shifting particularities of subjectivity, time and space. It permits the articulation of difference while simultaneously allowing social or political alignment as defined by the shifting particularities of social and/or historical circumstances. It acknowledges and incorporates the ways in which identity is constantly in negotiation across, between, and within, time (history), space (nation), and circumstance (individual subjectivity) and provides "the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4). Further, this discourse consciously steps away from the mainstream to critically evaluate social, political, and historical conditions of hegemony and oppression in an attempt to provide commentary and insight to these problems. This is an empowering tool for responding to oppressions enacted upon various groups, constituting, ostensibly, a "moving target" that, in the reflexive nature of its shifting articulation, refuses to be solely and stagnantly defined by dominant, hegemonic powers. It is within the liminal spaces of black female subjectivities, the movement across time and space in diasporic notions of home/dislocatedness and its alienating effects, and the centering/grounding function of African-based spirituality, representative of a common epistemology and liberatory

agency as expressed in the broad genre of speculative fiction that liberatory discourses emerge to challenge hegemonic literary and social paradigms. I explore the communicative possibilities of the multiply liminal discourses emerging from these black female liminal subjectivities as an interpretive frame within the specific discourse of black women writer's speculative fictions in the Americas.

I want to take a moment to elucidate the origin and significance of the concept of liminality as I am using it here. Victor Turner's concept of liminality, in "Liminality and Communitas," was originally an anthropological interpretive frame to describe a process of social transition in certain societies characterized by the conscious removal of certain members sharing a similar journey from the normal concourse of society to a liminal status within a ritual space. Liminality is described as a betwixt and between status symbolized by the womb, invisibility, sometimes ritual death; this shared state of being engenders the development of communitas among participating members. The creation of communitas serves as an educative field for experiential mastery of the core issues of life/death, good/evil, freedom/necessity, and functions as a generative source for invigorating social structures and posing new solutions to problems. (Turner 94-97)

The notion of liminality and communitas detailed above assumes a number of things about society: 1) that members of society share a sort of equanimity in terms of having a particular place and role within the "normal" concourse of society; 2) that the removal to a liminal status in a ritual space is a necessary and transient moment in the larger context of life, usually only occurring once or twice in a lifetime and 3) that members of the cohort return to society as full and respected members of that society. In the African Diasporic context in the Americas, however, one can not assume that the

African-descended members of society, especially women, always already enjoy an equanimity of place within the "normal" concourse of society, being marginalized as they were and continue to be for centuries during the slave trade, colonialism, and postcolonialism. African diasporic liminality and *communitas* in the Americas, therefore, is characterized by an ongoing practice of retreat from and re-entrance into a generally hostile society by various means, and constitutes an act that becomes necessary to their very survival within the concourse of mainstream society, which frequently does not accept them as full members of society with viable contributions.<sup>12</sup> In the United States, this development of *communitas* has been one of the functions of entities such as the black church, historically black colleges and universities, and black fraternities and sororities.

Thus, black women's speculative fiction constitutes an additional arena wherein this African diasporic liminality and *communitas* operates to articulate the problems within and potential solutions for society. Black women writers and critics retreat into the ritual space of black women's speculative texts, texts which are invisible to the mainstream concourse of society and literary discourse due to their spiritual content and marginalized<sup>13</sup> (from the mainstream perspective) generic form.<sup>14</sup> They retreat from

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<sup>12</sup> While Black Diaspora liminality acknowledges the "marginal" status inflicted upon oppressed peoples by hegemonic forces, the concept simultaneously asserts agency in the conscious choice to retreat from and re-enter society in multiple venues, and in fact claims power from a position typically considered subaltern.

<sup>13</sup> Much commentary has been made about the ways in which particular genres, such as science fiction and fantasy, are not considered "literary," but rather "fun," "escapist" or "popular" forms of writing unworthy of critical attention, thus placing them on the margins of academic discussion. See articles by Jewelle Gomez, Charles Saunders, Marleen Barr and Raffaella Baccolini.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, there are some writers, such as Toni Morrison, who possess the outstanding capacity to write with a dual framing that simultaneously employs multiply liminal discourses while crafting a text that



various communities: the academic literary community through the use of marginalized genres (science fiction, fantasy) and explicit invocation of the spiritual; retreat from the black community<sup>15</sup> in terms of speaking/writing black women's subjective experience in relation to not only racism, but sexism, classism, and heterosexism; and a retreat from the geographic constrictions of writing according to national boundaries to a more diasporic virtual/ritual space through the text, transcending the false fixedness of national or provincial boundaries. The retreat from these areas constitutes a multiply liminal positioning, creating *communitas* among black women writers and critics. Black women's speculative texts are ritual spaces that become the transcendent educative field for the core issues of not only life/death, good/evil, freedom/necessity, but also of dominance/resistance, oppression/survival-thriving, and victimhood/power. The writers render themselves invisible from the normal concourses of society and academia in their choice to write the spiritual in speculative texts, reinvigorating social structures, challenging current social paradigms, and providing cautionary insight, if not posing new solutions, to the problems of hegemony and oppression. Critics, through interpretation of these texts, negotiate the transition of these texts and their messages back into society/academia.

Multiply liminal discourse provides an entry point for engaging black speculative literatures on their own terms as opposed to the insipid application of rigid rules and forms. For example, many critics find it sufficient—and easiest—to categorize these

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possesses, arguably, both mainstream and academic appeal. The result is a text so richly layered that it is entirely possible to render viable critique without engaging these deeper layers of spiritual epistemology.

<sup>15</sup> Many black political agendas still demand the foregrounding of racial issues to the subsumption of gender, sexuality, and class issues.

works as magic realism. However, magic realism does not seem entirely appropriate to many of the texts generated by black women writers. This can be seen either in the paucity of criticism of particular texts, such as Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, or the perfunctory use of the convention of "magic realism" and the notion of the "mythic" to encapsulate the significance of the spiritual in texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Many black women writers, like Morrison, have recognized the difficulties critics frequently encounter in engaging certain texts and have called for an interpretive practice that opens the full range of interpretive possibilities located in their writings (Morrison).

One example of this alien literary articulation, which manifests in some of the speculative texts examined in this project, is firmly expressed in the mode of spiritual realism. I pose the concept of spiritual realism as an African diasporic revision of the familiar literary mode of "magic realism." There are a number of elements that spiritual realism would seem to share with magic realism. Magic realism (typically the invocation of folklore and "magic" to characterize inexplicable phenomena), is characterized as a "serious" literature that, rather than being "escapist," deals with serious issues; spiritual realism invokes folklore to deal with serious issues as well. The concept of spiritual realism speaks to the foundational perception and reception of "God-on-the-ground," i.e., as an integral, present force in everything, and in the everyday, lived experience of the characters. This perception is integrated so as to assume that the existence of a spiritual world is natural, normal and interactive with the living world, (Baker 1). This stands in opposition to the notion of a God "out there," coming down out-of-the-machine to intervene, magically, in the plot to create some magical twist by which characters are

miraculously salvaged or condemned and demands the "suspension of disbelief" to which Hopkinson refers.

The two concepts part, however, in the location of the epistemological frame of reference, and the purpose that the concept of magic realism seems to have developed as an explanatory model for a western "mainstream" readership. Magic realism functions as a sort of literary epistemological tourism, where the exotic world and thinking of the Other are put on display for a mainstream readership in worlds where ancient, primitive people really live and that gives them the feeling that *maybe* this view of the world is correct (Rogers). Further, this use of magic realism perpetuates the objective/non-objective, rational/emotional binaries that Western cultures use to distance themselves from "primitive" indigenous cultures who have different world-senses. Finally, Rogers suggests that magic realism is not speculative, but deals with the current everyday lives of people living in the present. His definition assumes a sense of reality that can only be anchored in the present, and that speculative modes do not deal with current realities. Spiritual realism within the texts that I examine is, indeed, speculative; this creates no contradiction in either the seriousness of the literature or the saliency of its commentary on current situations. Black speculative fiction is intrinsically bound up with the question of the present and its interconnectedness with the future that we are creating and/or how the future might be informed and created by our past. Further, black speculative fiction and spiritual realism coexist without contradiction, since an African epistemological frame of reference from which the potential worlds they elucidate posits an understanding of the past, present, and future as intimately interwoven with each other to engage the possibilities of events—historical or current—in the creation of the future. Spiritual

realism, therefore, is but one mode emerging from black women's speculative fictions generated from the specificity of texts examined within the frame of multiply liminal discourse.

### **When Lions Write History<sup>16</sup>: Multiply Liminal Discourse Applied**

Many of the elements that I articulate in mapping out multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive frame can be found, variously, in black texts that do not necessarily constitute speculative fiction. For example, you can see examples of African diasporic female communitas foregrounded in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*, Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Saltaters*. Spiritual realism abounds in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins With Tears*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Esmeralda Ribeiro's "A Vingança de Dona Léia" (Dona Leia's Revenge). These texts foreground particular aspects of the concept of multiply liminal discourse and demonstrate the pervasiveness of an African epistemological framing in engendering transformative politics. These texts present issues for consideration in shaping the direction of future societies.

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* allows a brief demonstration of how multiply liminal discourse operates as an interpretive frame within a text. The interpretive frame locates multiple liminal aspects converging within the text—protagonist subjectivity, diasporic space, and spiritual epistemology—in the character of Lissie Lyles. The text explores historical violence, cultural hegemony, and implications for how

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<sup>16</sup> From an African proverb of contested specific origin (some say it is Kenyan, others Ghanaian), "Only when lions write history will the hunters cease to be heroes."

the oppressed might respond in articulating a new paradigm for the present and the future.



The spiritual epistemological framing of the character of Lissie Lyles, referred to as Miss Lissie, is primary to articulating her subjective knowledge and diasporic positioning. As the literal and physical embodiment of the epistemological and spiritual concept of reincarnation, she is able to remember experiences from numerous previous lives. Her memory, rather than a machine, becomes the conduit for travel to and through earlier times and places. Technology is employed, however, as verification of Miss Lissie's assertion that she was various beings (not even limited to human forms, but animal forms as well) in previous lives, captured and documented in photographs. In reference to this actualized belief in reincarnation and the continuity of individual lives from the past into the present and future, Miss Lissie says, "I wouldn't mind dying if dying was all...for dying, I can tell you, is the least of it. Dying is even pleasant...What's not pleasant is coming back, and whether you have sense enough to know it or not, everybody, well almost everybody, does" (Walker, 190). Her commentary reflects an epistemology that remarks upon the way in which people, time, and circumstances are all interrelated; the consequences of actions performed today are not limited to the present, but affect the future, of which you remain a part, since almost everyone must "come back." This sense of the world demands an attention to all actions taken by all people in all times, and suggests that if everyone understood this spiritual cycle, we would be more careful of our present actions. She states:

You take the way things are going in the world today. You have your poisoned rivers and your poisoned air and your children turning into critters before your eyes.... You have a world that scares everybody to death. You can't go nowhere. You can't eat anything. You can't even hardly make love. And that's just today. There are days when the best thought you can have is that one day you'll die and leave it all behind.

Suwelo, let me tell you, you can't leave it behind. The life in this place is your life forever. You will always be here; and the ground underneath you. And you won't die until *it* does. ... I am tired of it. Not tired of life. But afraid of what living is going to look like and be like next time I come. (Walker, 190-191)

Miss Lissie's "beingness" is fully informed by this understanding of the world and everyone's relationship to it, demanding a basic respect for all life; but it is a perspective not everyone shares, and everyone suffers, consequently.

This spiritual epistemological framing serves as the foundation for Miss Lissie's subjectivity, which is foregrounded as the primary basis for her knowledge, yet remains in constant negotiation as to how much she can reveal of herself, when, and with whom. She knows of dismissed histories, untold, because she has lived them, experienced them, remembers them, and if the time and audience are right, shares them. Her choice of how and with whom to share her knowledge is negotiated according to time and circumstance and reflects her liminal status as an old, black, poor, southern woman. The majority of the time, (her)stories go unacknowledged not only because of who she is, but what she claims to know and how she claims to know it. The moment during which her character relates "passing" as a griot in the 1960s (relaying the experiences of slavery and the Middle Passage) occupies a safe instant wherein she is able to share the truth of history as she experientially *knows* it to have been with audiences that are already receptive to this information through mainstream historical discourses. Other aspects of mainstream

history, however, are not ready to be challenged by what she knows, and her strategy for sharing reflects this awareness that the audience is likely ill-equipped to accept what is about to be told. The most "radical" of Ms. Lissie's (her)stories, about the movement of African Moors into Europe in an attempt to syncretize the worship of the African Mother Goddess with the Christian Mary to save their religion (they are worshippers of the African Mother Goddess passing as Muslims) and end its persecution is written as a letter to a close friend in invisible, disappearing ink, suggesting that this information must continue to be guarded.<sup>17</sup> With her husband, Hal, she hides the fact that she was, in various lives, a white man and a lion because of his fear of these two things, destroying the pictures that reveal these aspects of herself so that he will never know. These strategies mark the negotiation of black female subjectivity and the awareness that their knowledge and ways of knowing will likely be dismissed by mainstream audiences, and even loved ones, but is still passed on, kept alive in the memories of other, trusted

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<sup>17</sup> This bit of (her)story that *Temple* references more than once, signaling its significance as an alternative historical narrative, bears strong resonances with the theories promulgated in Martin Bernal's controversial *Black Athena* volumes, namely the basic premise of African influences in early periods of Europe. The notorious "counterattack" by Mary Lefkowitz, in *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* and the subsequent *Black Athena Revisited* was an attempt to salvage modern classicist and ancient historian foundational narratives, hinging much of its argument on the idea of this history as a grand narrative built upon facts painstakingly constructed from largely undisputable evidence. Bernal countered Lefkowitz's assertions in his lengthy and detailed Bryn Mawr Classical Review of *Not Out of Africa*, and a raging debate outside of Bernal and Lefkowitz's exchanges abounds. What this reveals is that, despite the certain trends in historical discourses to include relativist positions that suggest that all history is fiction, so there is room for many narratives, most mainstream, privileged academic audiences are not merely unprepared, but are outright hostile to even the *possibility* of a history that entangles them with blackness, and as Walker suggests in *Temple*, certainly not black femaleness. Unlike Miss Lissie's character in *Temple*, however, whose old black poor southern femaleness is reason enough to ignore such "radical" assertions, Martin Bernal is a white Jewish man with stout academic credentials and over fifteen years of research behind his claims (solid enough proof of competence had he promulgated more acceptable mainstream ideas). Interestingly, too, is the fact that some of the most arduous opponents to Bernal's ideas are white women. This intertext provides a compelling moment of contemplation about *Temple's* larger concerns with the racism of elite academic institutions (particularly the women's studies department in the text where two of the characters were instructors) and control of historical narratives as a primary site of domination foundational to creating and perpetuating systemic oppressive ideologies.

guardians until circumstance permits the sharing of this information with a larger audience.

Diasporic space is intrinsically connected with Ms. Lissie's spiritual epistemological framing and subjective identity. It marks a polytemporal relationship between the past, present, and future and condenses time and space within Ms. Lissie as a "concentrated form of energy" (Walker 44) in a process I call quantum *metaphysics*—the physical/literal embodiment of the epistemological belief in reincarnation. She/it marks the integration of the old and new (i.e., traditional and modern) selves brought into direct contact across time, in a new space, embodying the possibility of integration for the fragmented hybrid diasporic subject. Because she is able to remember her previous lives in different locales and times, her perspective on life and relationships is not limited to the provincial experience of the South Carolina sea coast island where she was born, but encompasses the collective and cumulative experiences from previous lives, lending her a universality of understanding even in the specificity of her present physical form as a black woman.

The generic form that the text takes – spiritual realism—becomes a liminal discourse as it assumes the (her)story shared by Ms. Lissie and two other characters (Zeze and Nzingha) to be true. These characters reveal the ways in which this (her)story has been erased from mainstream history but is kept alive, orally transmitted from generation to generation at several different points in the text. Returning to the dismissed (her)story of the Black Moors mentioned previously, this information passed onto her deceased husband's nephew, Suwelo, poses the crucial moment of interrogation encapsulating the crux of the matter in black women's multiply liminal discourses. Ms.



Lissie shares with Suwelo the xenophobic justification for the murder of the Mooresses and obliteration of their religion during the Spanish Inquisition as they were burned as witches:

They burned us so thoroughly, we did not even leave smoke... Whenever they saw our power it made them feel they had none. They felt themselves the moon to our sun. And yet, as every woman knows, the moon also has great power. We are connected to all three planes—past, present, future—of life; so is man, but he will not let himself see it...

When they burned me at the stake I cursed them; what else is a dark woman to do?...But what I refused to give up was my essence; nor could I. For it was simply this: I do not share their vision of reality, but have, and cherish, my own. And when you look at the world today, it fits my curse exactly, but with one exception: Those I cursed do not suffer alone; everything and everyone does. This I would not have had. It was a long time in the learning, that lesson: You cannot curse a part without damning the whole. (Walker 196-197).

Thus, the core issue with which the text wrestles is revealed: How do we avoid repeating cycles of intolerance and hatred? How can/should the oppressed go about negotiating a response to oppression without repeating the curse? The text reveals the struggle of women, each one trying to negotiate the truth of her past with the reality of her present where oppression continues to exist, and attempting to create a response that will not reiterate the violence visited upon her, but will, instead, transcend violence and oppression in spite of whatever misery has been visited in the past.

The text does not offer a ready-made solution; nor can it. It foregrounds marginalized (her)stories espoused by multiply liminal subjects—black women, colored women—and reveals their assessment of historical events in producing present conditions as well as interrogates where the future is headed if we fail to deal effectively with oppressions. The passage of time is required to engender the healing process. In the

meantime, Ms. Lissie's character seems to suggest that these negated (her)stories must be passed on somehow, and kept alive for the appropriate moment when they can be properly received by the mainstream public and allowed to move the hearts of the hearers. Thus, the text poses the greater challenge to its audience to suspend their disbelief and assume that she (the author, the protagonists and characters espousing these indigenous (her)stories is *right* and what is shared is *true*. The burden of developing responses to these old, yet ever present oppressions, is left with the reader.

### **The Basis for Cross-Cultural Comparison of Speculative Fiction**

To return to the necessity of engaging difference within black experiences, which multiply liminal discourse offers as one of its features within this project, I turn to an elucidation of speculative fiction as developed in its various social and historical contexts of the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean/Diaspora. However, because this is a cross-cultural study, some basis for comparison necessarily must be established. Therefore, this section also highlights similarities. When considered in tandem, the points of difference and similarity reveal insights into the social and literary milieu of each region. The social/historical backdrop remains central to the findings elucidated in each chapter, the synopses of which directly follow.

On an international level, few black writers and critics of the speculative fiction genre exist. Even as recent years have marked an increase in the production of speculative fictions by black authors, this type of literary production as well as literary criticism remains relatively small (Rutledge 236). That notwithstanding, this project identifies four black women authors from the diverse areas of Brazil, the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada who have produced work within the genre. Because the United

States offers the greatest proliferation of black speculative textual production, I will begin there and move to situation of science fiction literature and criticism in the contexts of Brazil, then on to the Caribbean and its Diaspora.

### *The United States*

The critical examination of speculative fiction as a definitive genre in black literatures originated in the United States with the scholarly attention to science fiction writers Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler by mostly science fiction fans and critics. By all accounts considered the godfather and godmother of black science fiction, these two critically acclaimed writers were considered the only African American writers of science fiction for close to three decades, starting in the sixties and moving up through the nineties.<sup>18</sup> Now, however, the field has witnessed an explosion of talent in the speculative genre with black writers represented in almost every sub-genre of the field.

The publication of Sheree Thomas' *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* in 2000 illuminates the historical presence of black writing in the speculative genre as well as reveals emergent voices, providing inroads for new ways of examining already familiar Black texts and calling for the examination of works by authors as yet unrecognized in literary circles. Well-known science fiction writers such as Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Charles Saunders are highlighted alongside authors not traditionally read as speculative writers, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Chesnutt, Amiri Baraka, and Ishmael Reed. Emergent writers such as Evie Shockley, Linda Addison, Ama Patterson, Kalamu ya Salaam and Kiini Ibura Salaam reflect the voice of a

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Delany's first publication is *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962); Octavia Butler's first published novel is *Patternmaster* (1976).

new and vibrant generation of writers that testify to the productive future of the genre in the coming generations. Demonstrating the presence of blacks who write in the genre of horror and other popular genres<sup>19</sup>, Brandon Massey published the first anthology devoted to horror by black writers in 2004 titled *Dark Dreams*, proclaiming, "It's time to expand our awareness of what black writers can do with a pen" (x).

In terms of science fiction criticism, Thomas' anthology, which features a few critical essays by more well-known writer-critics, appears to have sparked an interest in the critical inquiry of this phenomenon now understood as black speculative fiction. That is not to say that earlier critique of particular writers and subgenres did not exist prior to 2000; certainly, critical interrogation of the works of Delany and Butler have proliferated since the start of their careers; and both Jewelle Gomez and Rebecca Johnson published critical essays in the 1990s, foreshadowing the interest to come. It would seem, however, that Thomas's attention to historicizing black speculative literary production may very well be the generative force in the currently proliferating criticism of the genre. In addition to the critical works in *Dark Matter*, one can note Gregory Rutledge's "Futuristic Fiction and Fantasy: The Racial Establishment" (2001), which offers a historical overview of futuristic fiction and fantasy genres and marks the increased presence of black writers and writing within those forms. He highlights the impact of literary movements, the publishing industry, and socio-economic factors as possible explanations for the paucity of black presence (in terms of readers, writers, producers, and even as

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<sup>19</sup> Massey's anthology includes other genres not considered speculative fiction as well, such as mystery, suspense and thrillers. I include him here to highlight the ongoing practice of asserting a black presence in areas in which black voices have been under-represented.

characters or subjects) in science fiction until the 1960s.<sup>20</sup> Alondra Nelson confronts the rhetoric of "raceless, placeless, bodiless" identities proposed by the digital age and its implicit reification of old racial ideologies in propounding a paradigm of social erasure of difference (1). Kali Tal, in "That Just Kills Me," proposes a subgenre of black science fiction called "the black militant near-future novel," revealing a commonality of function and perspective in the works of Sutton Griggs, George Schuyler, John Williams, and Chester Himes. Sandra Grayson's *Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future* (2003), Sheree Thomas's second anthology *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2005), and a special Spring 2005 edition of FEMSPEC magazine titled *Speculative Black Women: Magic, Fantasy, and the Supernatural*<sup>21</sup> reflect critical efforts that bespeak a commitment to advancing the scholarly attention to and criticism of black speculative fiction.

The scholarly attention discussed above indicates a new direction for science fiction. In most areas of the world where science fiction is produced, the genre originates as a fan-based and fan-driven culture. In the United States, as well as in Brazil, scholarly attention and criticism enters the community of readers and writers relatively late, due to its traditionally marginalized relegation to "popular" as opposed to "literary" status by

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<sup>20</sup> The reasons Rutledge offers for black under-participation in the science fiction and fantasy world are legion: the systemic racism of the science fiction industry that persisted for many years in the belief that white America, the main readers of SF, "would not pay to read about black characters" (239); the perception of the genre as "hedonistic" when there are "real issues" for black authors to address in more serious forms (236); the dehumanizing role scientific discourse historically played in the perpetuation of ideologies that radically circumscribed the social and material realities of black people and the subsequent distrust with which black folks regarded it (239) and so on.

<sup>21</sup> A number of the aforementioned critics and writers have enacted a conscious effort to engage black science fiction literature and criticism, developing a group known as the Afrofuturists who are devoted to the serious critique of the impact of the digital age upon speculative/futuristic genres in relation to black experiences.

academia. Brazil possesses a lengthy attraction to and engagement with the genre originally by way of North American and European writers' translated texts. They have begun, however, to produce their own writers and critics of a distinctly Brazilian brand of science fiction.

### *Brazil*

Brazil as a nation joined the international community of science fiction writers as early as the nineteenth century, with specialists in the genre emerging around the second half of the twentieth century. The advent of the internet has served to engage discussions with numerous fanzines, blogs, and e-groups dedicated to the discussion of science fiction and fantastic fiction in both its text and film forms.<sup>22</sup> While the genre has attracted some academic critical interest in the works of Roberto de Sousa Causo and M. Elizabeth Ginway, science fiction in Brazil shares a status similar to its North American counterparts as being relegated outside the realm of “true” literature and, therefore, unworthy of critical attention (Ginway 138). Nonetheless, all genres and subgenres of science fiction can be found in Brazilian literature generally, but due to the socio-economic situation of African-Brazilians in general and African-Brazilian women specifically, the production of any kind of literature by this populace is a complicated and contested feat and constitutes a political act through its assertion as “black” literature in a culture that has long regarded itself as a racial democracy. Aline França defies the statistics and stands as the lone voice in the wilderness as an African-Brazilian writer of science fiction.

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<sup>22</sup> This assertion holds true for the North American context as well; science fiction has thrived largely as a fan-driven genre and culture, with academic attention entering later in the history of the genre.

## *The Caribbean/Diaspora*

Just as Aline França seems to represent a singular case of a black woman writing science fiction in Brazil, so the case seems for the Caribbean and its Diaspora. Black female Caribbean writers of science and speculative fictions remain few, with Jamaican-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson functioning as the only self-asserted writer of science fiction. A member of the Afrofuturist community, Hopkinson edited an anthology in 2000 titled *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, in which she brings together what she calls fabulist fiction by Caribbean writers of mainly Jamaican, Trinidadian, and Guyanese descent. She writes in the introduction that her call for submissions sought "fiction written within a Caribbean or Caribbean diasporic context. Fabulist, unreal, or speculative elements such as magic realism, fantasy, folklore, fable, horror, or science fiction must be an integral part of the story" (XII). Her criteria, stated as follows, aligns with a literary con/invention that I term "spiritual realism:"

duppies and jumbies must exist outside the imaginations of the characters [meaning *within* the realm of "the real"]; any scientific extrapolation should seem convincingly based in the possible. *It's an approach designed to ease or force the suspension of disbelief*, to block flight back into the familiar world, to shake up the reader into thinking in new tracks. (XII, emphasis mine)

What turned up was an unexpected mix of genres that do not conform, according to Hopkinson, to the expectations, from a Northern American literary context, of the speculative or fantastical. This unexpected turn, she attributes to the largely different traditions of writing that stem from two different "world-senses": one leaning towards scientific fiction methodology that is concerned with proving how the irrational exists; the other where the irrational simply exists alongside the rational, and explication is

unlikely to yield "rational" answers. Essentially, these are "two traditions of writing that have different priorities and protocols" but which ultimately conveys, from a Caribbean worldview, "that disorienting sense" of archetype and otherworldliness that Hopkins was looking for. They invoke so-called marginal genres to engender a liminal status, and go so far as to create new and/or reinvent established genres in the creation of the text as a liminal discourse.

This epistemological clash with generic form is precisely the grounds upon which I posit black women's speculative fiction as an *always already alien* phenomenon from the related genres from which its characteristics can be derived (science fiction, fantasy, alternative histories, fabulist fiction, etc.). As mentioned previously, the term "alien" is a trope to characterize the fundamental disorientation that occurs in black women's writing of speculative fictions when an African spiritual sense of the world is invoked. It highlights difference, troubling the familiar and reorienting the normative. The liminal position of black female subjectivity, diasporic space, and the use of spirituality as an epistemological expression of subversive power converge in an act of creation of new genres that serve as sites of resistance as well as an assertion of a distinctly African Diasporic mode of expression. Considering these contingencies, multiply liminal discourse provides an operative framework to explicate these texts.



In the chapters that follow, black women's speculative fictions reveal, in the simultaneous specificity of their regional cultures and expansiveness of African diasporic subjectivity, a perception of reality that interrogates current and future social conditions. The conjunctive examination of the common elements of black female subjectivity,



African spiritual epistemology and newly envisioned constructions of space/community reveal a powerful liberatory praxis in each text's respective socio-political context. Each chapter alternately foregrounds one of the elements of multiply liminal discourse. Focused analysis of that aspect through the selected culture elucidates the manner in which that concept informs speculative generic experimentation. This provides a point of entry into the subversive nature of the texts. As each chapter highlights one of the three aspects—subjectivity, space, and spirituality—they slip between and among the other two aspects, interlacing these facets into an integrated subjective whole.

Chapter Two opens by foregrounding the implications of race—claiming and owning blackness—in the development and treatment of subjective identities in Brazil and moves into an analysis of Aline França's *A Mulher de Aleduma* (Aleduma's Wife) to ascertain the implications of reclaiming Black womanhood in the African-Brazilian socio-cultural context. It further engages the ways in which African hybrid spirituality and protected *quilombo*-like diasporic space informs the production of a black female science fiction text as a political act. An extensive analysis of African-Brazilian culture and politics establishes the basis for the idea of a consciously African-Brazilian literature. This is a necessarily extensive engagement because of the prolonged proclivity towards denying the tenability of race as an organizing feature within Brazilian society. Socio-historical contextualization highlights the significance of the author's text as reclamation of black female subjectivity as a political act through use of the subversive speculative genre that I term indigenous history, which combines the mainstream articulations of myth and science fiction. The text engages the contemporary challenge of neo-colonialism and deals with the inevitable epistemological clash of cultures in that

encounter. Its depiction of a group of black people descended from blacks from another planet resonates strongly with the genesis beliefs of the Dogon people of Mali, who say they are descended from the star Sirius A.<sup>23</sup> Through psychic connection with their extra-terrestrial ancestors, this group of blacks are able to challenge imperialistic and colonial powers. The text articulates a counterhegemonic position by contextualizing the development of a consciously black femininity and liberation strategies in the Brazilian context.

Chapter Three, “The Spirit of Breaking the Rules,” centers the implications of Diasporic space as a condition of always already hybrid cross-fertilization of black cultures as examined through Jamaican author Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* and Caribbean-Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*. These two texts are juxtaposed to highlight the diasporic/ trans-spatial aspect of multiply liminal discourse. The geographic region of the Caribbean at once takes the multifarious islands as a distinctive collectivity with particular identifiable features as a region despite the widely variant social and cultural make-up attributable to each one. At the same time, the question of Caribbean identity for the people of the Caribbean has presented both challenges and opportunities for Caribbean authors to articulate the unique sensibility of Island subjectivities, or Caribbean consciousness. The notions of hybridity, *métissage*, and *creolité* speak to the amalgamation of cultures characteristic of the Caribbean context

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<sup>23</sup> The Dogon's creation story articulates a path of evolution for their people that begins with the explosion of the star, Sirius A, and its dwarf star, Sirius B, in a kind of 'big bang' theory. Their beliefs were dismissed for ages, until the scientific discovery of the invisible dwarf star Sirius B in the 1930s. It raised questions as to how this primitive people could know about this star, invisible to the naked eye, without the aid of modern, scientific equipment. The Dogon continue to worship the star, holding a ceremony – the ritual of renewal, Sigui—every 60 years, which is the amount of time it takes for Sirius B to complete one orbit around Sirius A. (Azuonye, 48)

while terms such as *négritude* gesture towards a reconnection with the peculiarly African contribution to the blend.

Like the actual geographic location of the Caribbean, Chapter Three is situated as a bridge between the South American Afro-Brazilian context and the North American Black female cultural and literary milieu. Like Brazil, the Caribbean is a larger region wherein hybridity is part and parcel of the dominant narrative on collective identity; and like the Northeastern region of Brazil (Bahia), Jamaica possesses a majority African-descended population and a distinctively African-based culture. However, like the U.S., the colonialist attitudes affecting black populations, whether the dominance of the white culture be physically present or not, has left an indelible mark on the psychological, social and cultural configurations of the African-descended people in the region, as suggested in W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double-consciousness" (5) and Frantz Fanon's concept of "third person consciousness" (112). Slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism are the manifestation of what Afrocentrists call a white supremacist ideology that creates the similar consequences and conditions of economic oppression, psychological dissociation, and cultural denigration for black populations in Africa as well as across the Diaspora. In the drive to combat the system of racist ideologies and practices that continue to oppress darker populations, Black Nationalist (and masculinist) ideologies and paradigms were implemented to counter the effects of white supremacy and racism and restore the history, culture, and dignity of African-descended people to themselves. But as Patricia Saunders suggests, "the two categories of history/identity, while providing a central point of engagement for Caribbean writers, have also been deployed effectively to decenter women's experiences in favor of a more nationalistic perspective" (134). This

chapter seeks to engage the Jamaican feminine perspective on the interplay of Caribbean identity/subjectivity, diasporic space/travel and spirituality in the creation of New World identities. In terms of genre, Brodber's text collapses the style of the personal diary with anthropological field notes to intellectually, physically and psychically unite, through the character of Ella Townsend, geography (space), culture (spirituality), and consciousness (subjectivity). The character of Ella is a researcher for the Works Projects Association in southeast Louisiana, who, during the process of interviewing Mammy Sue Ann King, becomes a channel for additional deceased informants who offer their part of the history from their own perspectives. This experience poses a challenge to her western training as an anthropologist and posits multiple sites of connection, culturally, historically, and politically for black diasporic subjectivities. Likewise, Nalo Hopkinson's text demands that the protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, learn to embrace her Jamaican heritage and spiritual inheritance despite her western upbringing that demands she deny her spiritual capabilities. *Brown Girl in the Ring* constructs a near-future vision of Jamaican Toronto that shifts the perspective (and ownership) of techno-futuristic culture from the mainstream to the so-called subaltern, generating an alternatively conceived futuristic paradigm. The character of Ti-Jeanne learns to use the formerly rejected teachings of *obeah* learned from her grandmother and develops hybrid indigenous-futuristic technologies that work to incorporate the seemingly binary contradictions between Eurocentric and indigeno-centric epistemologies in order to combat the evil controlling the lives of the poor in urban Toronto.

Chapter Four highlights the significance of African-based spirituality in the Yoruba goddess, Oya, as the generative subversive force that enables the protagonist,

Lauren Oya Olamina, to develop a radicalized liberatory praxis that embraces difference and change as integral to its salvific discourse. Olamina develops a visionary liberation theology through the medium of a scientific genre that I term *ectopia*. Octavia Butler's near-future apocalyptic text *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel *Parable of the Talents* require that its protagonist, Lauren Olamina, confront the perils of an American society ruined by its neglect of environmental concerns and the perpetuation of bigotry and conformity as methods of social control. Butler's texts highlight the evolution of a religio-spiritual practice borne of necessity as Lauren develops an understanding of God that responds pragmatically to the needs of those who are poor and destitute, or perilously close to being so. Rather than hearkening to either an inherent or dis-remembered spiritual heritage, as with the other texts, however, Butler's texts articulate a dialectical spirituality informed by various spiritual belief systems, taking from each one what is useful for the times to generate a new belief system. The solution proffered for the salvation for all people is the consistent and steady work towards heaven—literally—as they work towards the goal of returning to "the stars" to colonize the moon, creating an interesting circularity with França's text, which articulates the descent of humans from beings from another planet.

Engagement with subjectivity, space and spirituality in these texts is ultimately about bridging the ideological and practical divide—the ability of literature as ideology to perform practical, material work. Chapter five elucidates the connection between liberation ideology and black women's speculative texts. It ultimately reveals the ways in which liberation ideology and the activist nature of black speculative texts operate within the conjure space of multiply liminal discourse to imagine a space for black folk in

liberated communities of future worlds. If texts are theoretical/ideological exercises, then these texts galvanize theory into practice, marrying the black radical spirit of the text to political/material concerns. They invoke the human subjective presence of black folk, a presence that must be acknowledged and affirmed in the here and now if it is to have any place in the future, imagined or otherwise. In social contexts where the very material conditions of black life preclude the certainty of future existence, the imperative of transforming the theoretical and ideological into workable paradigms with material consequences becomes clear. Part of the work that black women writers of speculative fiction invite us to do in their conscious creation of "alien" works is to embrace the differences that, writ large or made small, are nonetheless extant in our daily interactions. Through these texts, we are offered the possibility to imagine new ways of relating to each other *because* of our differences, not in spite of them. The very future of our earth, after all, depends on it.

## CHAPTER 2

### TO SERVE TWO GODS: SCIENCE AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDIGENOUS HISTORY IN ALINE FRANÇA'S *A MULHER DE ALEDUMA*

*"...the effectiveness of myth is restricted to all those who are not yet able or who refuse to come to terms with the complexities of modern life, and, instead, driven by frustration and fear, take refuge in such explicitly and simplistic world views."*

~Jost Hermand

*"The [Africans] have no business knowing any of this."*<sup>24</sup>

~ Kenneth Brecher, MIT physics professor

Loving blackness, as bell hooks asserts, is a radical act. This is certainly the case in Brazil where, because racial identification has been associated with the hegemonic practices of South African apartheid and United States racism, claiming blackness constitutes an un-Brazilian social identification. Racial erasure through a discourse of hybridity—social, cultural, and racial amalgamation that absorbs blackness—is regarded as the positive alternative to claiming blackness in the public ideology. The concepts of the "racial democracy" and the "mulatto escape hatch" perpetuate the myth that Brazil is an oppression-free society on the basis of racial discrimination. The myth still persists in large measure in Brazilian society today and is exported as part of its national currency on the world market of cultural exchange.

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<sup>24</sup> Reference to the Dogon people's knowledge of the stars Sirius A and B and related astrological details without the use of scientific equipment in *Astronomy of the Ancients*, ed. by Kenneth Brecher and M. Feirtag. P.109. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979.

In light of this, it is critical to reveal a history of claiming blackness by African-Brazilians that consistently asserts pride in African heritage beyond the mainstream bounds of social acceptability. This act reveals the significant role black women have played in claiming blackness, even as they simultaneously, on the surface at least, constitute the most oppressed members of Brazilian society. This chapter charts a history of specifically "black" racialized resistance militating against dominant discourse in Brazilian history, culture, and literatures. Brazilian science fiction offers an already oppositional discourse by which mostly white male authors engage national and international issues, yet the relative paucity of black writers in general delimits the representation of black political discourse. Black science fiction author Aline França uses science fiction as a medium to claim subversive power for and among African-Brazilian people through women. Simultaneously a science fiction text and mythology, França's text begins with the reclamation of black feminine subjectivity and black romantic relationships and engages its interplay with African spiritual epistemologies and diasporic space. The analysis reveals the potential African-descended women offer in salvific visions for humankind.

### **Race, Class, Literature: Social, Historical and Cultural Constraints and the Virtual Absence of African-Brazilian Science Fiction**

M. Elizabeth Ginway published one of the first book length treatments of Brazilian science fiction in 2004. Her text, *Brazilian Science Fiction*, provides a historical and critical overview of the various shifts and movements within the genre over the years, describing it as a socially subversive genre that operates as an "ongoing social narrative or political dialogue within Brazilian culture" (31). But in Brazil, the writing of



science fiction is the domain of white men, and even as Finisia Fidelia points to the problematic absence of women and minority writers of the genre, Ginway ventures to suggest that this absence is somewhat remedied by the fact that “white male science fiction authors consistently explore issues relating to women and race” (209). As will be revealed in the forthcoming sections, the notion of white males speaking for others (even in "pluralistic" Brazil), is not without serious implications, namely in its perpetuation of homogenizing discourses operating to obscure social and economic imbalances between the white elite and the black poor. The various representations of blacks and women in white Brazilian men’s science fiction would constitute an entirely new area of inquiry which expediency will not allow at this time. An examination of the social and historical conditions that necessarily challenge the presumption that white men can adequately speak for black women in the Brazilian context would better serve the larger goals of this project.

Even though Brazilian science fiction has flourished in the past fifty years or so, the issue remains as to the relative paucity of its production by women and blacks in Brazil. Central to understanding this paucity is the dismissive treatment of the question of "race" in Brazilian discourse and its impact on virtually every other aspect of society affecting the lives of African-descended people. Through the homogenizing discourse of the racial democracy, broad social and economic disparities are allowed to persist on the basis of "skin color," class and the "mulatto escape hatch"<sup>25</sup> rhetoric that continues to be widely accepted. Thus, for those African-Brazilians who write, to embrace blackness and

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<sup>25</sup> Carl Degler coins this phrase in his comparative examination of historical race relations in the United States and Brazil, *Neither Black Nor White* (1971).

announce oneself as a black writer is a militant political act against that national discourse.

This virtual absence of black and female writers of science fiction in Brazil is simply reflective of yet another way in which the country is, in fact, divided by racial, geographic and economic disparities, suffering the world's worst income distribution according to the World Bank (Ginway 25). In Brazil, class stratification is racialized, with rich and middle class whites at the top, and therefore more readily exposed to the technologies that are assumed to influence the development of scientific fictions and fantasy, and the educational level and leisure time to write, and blacks on the bottom, struggling with daily survival, lacking the education, exposure and leisure to write, generally speaking. Research conducted by Marcelo Paixão of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro reveals that "in some regions of Brazil, to be black means to live closer to the reality of inhabitants of the poorest African countries" (Carneiro 103). This is in spite of the fact that Brazil is not a poor country; indeed, Brazil ranks eighth among the major world economies (Nogueira 105). The distribution of wealth, however, reveals wild disparities between the poorest and the rich elite in the country. The poorest twenty percent of the population owns only 2.6% of national wealth, while the wealthiest ten percent commands 48.1% (Leal 291). Over one-half of Brazil's population lives below the poverty line (Nogueira 105). Blacks are paid the lowest salaries, have shorter life expectancies, and rank at the lowest education levels in every part of the country. In terms of educational attainment, illiteracy among African-Brazilians is 28.5% versus eleven percent for whites (Leal 291). Poor black students attending the poorly funded and ill-equipped public schools find it difficult to compete with the private education of white

students, accounting for the under-representation of blacks in the university system and the institution of a quota system in recent years in an attempt to remedy this imbalance (Fry). While some blacks have managed to overcome these obstacles and obtain higher education and professional positions, the majority of blacks in Brazil—especially if the skin color is very black—make up the poorest sectors of the population (Carneiro).

Relative to the position of black women in society, it is revealed that, unsurprisingly, white men make up the highest paid sector of the population with black men earning 70% of what white men make, white women earning 60% of what white men make, and black women earning 40% of what white men make (Alice). Helena Theodoro asserts that, in the workforce, black women (as distinct from mulatta<sup>26</sup> women) continue to confront barriers of racial prejudice, relegated largely to positions as domestic workers and kept out of the more professional domains reserved for "jovens da boa aparência" (good-looking youths), which is coded language designed to filter out dark-skinned women (36). Thus, social and economic ascension for black women is much slower than for black men and white women (Oliveira, Costa and Porcaro). Further, the UN Commission's Report on Racism in Brazil in 1995 devoted a section to their findings on "The Situation of Colored Women" in Brazil. This sector of society was specifically examined because of their tri-fold oppression based on class, gender, and skin color: "Black women receive the lowest salaries, are employed in the most unhealthy locations, and work a triple working day. For these reasons, [they] are a barometer of society; the

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<sup>26</sup> In Brazil, the term mulatto is not considered pejorative, and refers to persons of mixed Portuguese and African ancestry.

degree of political evolution of Brazilian society is directly related to the political conquests of black women” (sec.51).

In a society where the statistics for the population in general delimits the audience for literary consumption, and where the majority of blacks are disproportionately undereducated, poor, and therefore lacking access to the world of books and the practice of reading, the black writer is fiercely embattled with the question of audience. Black writers in Brazil have historically struggled against the marginalization of their writing, engaging various strategies to gain a voice within the literary establishment as well as the broader culture. As Steven White asserts, "there has been an increasingly more open discussion in Brazil of the systematic marginalization of African-Brazilian writers from Brazilian literary culture, a phenomenon that mirrors the manner by which Brazil's institutionalized racism perpetuates the myth of a 'racial democracy'"<sup>27</sup> (69). African Brazilian writers have responded to this marginalization by creating avenues outside of the mainstream establishments, primarily in developing their own publishing houses and/or through self-publishing. This renders writings by African Brazilian writers a bit more difficult to access, but nonetheless reaffirms the existence of militantly African Brazilian literatures that demand to be heard.

Therefore, what Finisia Fideli suggests regarding the paucity of women writing science fiction in Brazil can be extrapolated to blacks writing in Brazil generally: “The greatest problem... is the lack of a market. In a country where one tries, without much success, to reach the mark of three books per inhabitant per year... there is little room for

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<sup>27</sup> The notion of the “racial democracy” was coined by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s and posits the idea that no oppression on the basis of race exists in Brazil because the entire population is miscegenated.

the publication of science fiction...” (56). It would appear that, in the Brazilian context, very few black readers and writers of the science fiction genre are produced. Further, despite much of the nationalist impulse and its concern with cultural identity that has driven the development of Brazilian literature generally and Brazilian science fiction particularly that would resist a racialized classification of literature, a distinct African Brazilian literature does exist. The next section explores the development of African Brazilian literature within the contours of a nation whose cultural identity has traditionally sought to minimize racialized classifications and identifications while at the same time appropriating African-based cultural practices as representative of a distinctly Brazilian national identity.

### **The Formation of African Brazilian Literature**

The notion of the racial democracy and *lusotropicalism* as espoused by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre has held strong sway in the popular and nationalist imaginary about the nature of racialized relations in Brazil for a great portion of the twentieth century. Lusotropicalism argues that the sexual prowess of Portuguese colonizers was so great that they were able to engender a new race of people—neither purely European, African, nor Indian, but rather a hybrid mixture attributable to “the unbridled lust of the Portuguese male” (Ginway 19). Because the majority of society is a product of this miscegenation, the Portuguese effectively created a “new people,” propagated as a superior means of colonization and creation of a new nation in the new world. Numerous subsequent studies have expounded upon this idea of Brazil as a racial democracy and representative of the ultimate new or emerging people in the quintessential blending of cultures as opposed to other colonialist powers who attempted to transplant their

European cultures into the new world wholesale. Carl Degler's *Neither Black nor White* (1971), Thomas Skidmore's *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (1974) and Darcy Ribeiro's *Os Brasileiros: Teória do Brasil* (1978) all study the implications of this ideology, positing Brazilian social racial constructions as more benign than the United States or South Africa. Thus, hybrid identity becomes a cornerstone of Brazilian identity and nationalism. Despite socioeconomic studies in recent years that debunk these ideologies as myth and the shift in academic circles to acknowledge the racial democracy as myth, the concept still remains a powerful mainstay in Brazil's public imaginary.

It is within this context of Brazilian identity politics that conversations surrounding racialized identities within the literary realm are constituted. Unsurprisingly, the concept of a distinctly African-Brazilian literature is still met with skepticism as the nationalist impulse to define the country's literary production as simply "Brazilian" continues. Within the last twenty-five years, the time during which these myths have been disproved by socio-economic studies, literary critics began exploring the dimensions of race and color, examining earlier Brazilian writers and the negotiation of their racial identities within and outside of their literary productions. David Brookshaw's *Raça e Cor na Literatura Brasileira* (1983), Zila Bernd's *Introdução a Literatura Negra* (1988), and Edimilson Pereira's "Survey of African-Brazilian Literature" (1995) are all literary surveys that attempt to establish a history of African Brazilian literature since the nineteenth century and to articulate its defining features.

Brookshaw's text provides a comprehensive history of Brazilian literature. For early African-descended writers of Brazilian literature, Brookshaw notes several ways in

which the writer negotiates the "problem" of his color: 1) the erudite tradition, wherein he exhibits such mastery of the skill that no one would guess his origin; 2) the popular tradition, wherein African identity is openly revealed in the genre of humor and pathos, which at times becomes accused of minstrelsy by playing to stereotypes; and 3) the tradition of protest and satire that militates against what they recognize as the whitening ideals of Brazilian society, or *branqueamento* (178). Brookshaw argues that the path an African-descended writer chose was dictated by the degree of his ability to rise above the "compartment line" –that is, his skin color and physical features, in combination with the cultured activity of writing, creates an opportunity for *branqueamento*, or whitening himself culturally so that he may move into the upper class strata. He states, "the North American color bar has its equivalent in Brazil in the compartment line, a line which divides the white way of life along with the cultural traditions and patterns of social etiquette from the African-Brazilian, the catholic from the pagan, the monogamous from the polygamous, the bourgeoisie from the masses...(222)," but in making the decision to cross the compartment line, the black discovers the color line. He suggests that the discourse of class functioned to obscure the very present problem of race in this negotiation of identities.

Edimilson Pereira provides a brief, yet fairly comprehensive overview of major African-Brazilian authors from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and offers brief biographical information in addition to genre, themes, and titles of major works written by each author. He ultimately argues that "the theme of black ethno-cultural identity is of central importance in African-Brazilian literature" but that "ethnic origins and content are not sufficient to establish the specificity of African-Brazilian literature" (879). He calls

for a deeper analytical engagement inclusive of aspects of form (genre), world vision (epistemology), the interaction of difference, and the rupture of models towards "the stimulation of a new aesthetic and social sensibility" (Pereira 879).

Zila Bernd's *Introdução a Literatura Negra* takes those steps called for by Pereira to legitimize the notion of an African-Brazilian literature by defining it according to worldview and the authors' self-proclamation as a black writer, the "*Eu enunciator*" [I Pronouncement]:

O conceito de literatura negra não se atrela nem à cor da pele do autor nem apenas à temática por ele utilizada, mas emerge da própria evidência textual cuja consistência é dada pelo surgimento de um eu enunciator que se quer negro. Assumir a condição negra e enunciar o discurso em primeira pessoa parece ser o aporte maior trazido por essa literatura, constituindo-se em um de seus marcardores estilísticos mais expressivos.<sup>28</sup> (Bernd, 22).

The concept of black literature is neither bound by the color of the skin, nor merely by the thematics utilized, but emerges from its own textual evidence of which consistency is given by the emergence of an "I" pronouncement that the author wants to be black. To assume the black condition and to announce the discourse in first person seems to be the greatest contribution brought by this literature, constituting one of its more expressive stylistic markers. [Translation mine.]<sup>29</sup>

To strengthen the case for a black literature in Brazil, she draws parallels with Caribbean Francophone (particularly Antillean) literature and thought, and claims the same elements for Black Brazilian writing and ideology (25).

All three of these texts are devoted to historicizing, and/or defining a black literature for Brazil. What is interesting to note, however, is that female writers are barely

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<sup>29</sup> All translations in the text, unless indicated otherwise, are mine. This includes the translation of the author's text for which, because of space considerations, I simply offer my translation in place of the original Portuguese.



mentioned. This may be due to a paucity of literature written by black women during the early time periods which are being discussed and the low educational levels that the majority of black women still must overcome, even today. Nonetheless, it is dubious that the number of black women writers is as few as the criticism would lead us to believe. Brookshaw mentions only Carolina Maria de Jesus briefly in his otherwise extensive volume. Pereira offers four paragraphs out of his "Survey of African-Brazilian Literature," and rather off-handedly refers the reader to an article written by another researcher (Pereira 879). The only female author Bernd engages in her text is Míriam Alves. However, Míriam Alves, herself, was able to find eighteen black women poets to publish in her bilingual anthology, *Enfim... Nós [Finally... Us]* (1994), published by Three Continents Press in the United States; this accomplishment went completely unremarked upon in Brazilian letters (Rowell 804). And in 2005, Alves co-edited a bilingual volume of short fiction by African-Brazilian women writers titled *Mulheres Escre-vendo [Women Righting]* with Mango Publishing. The absence, even considering the arguments posed above regarding the barriers to publication for women and blacks, is suspicious. Here, the intersection of racism with sexism obscures, if not completely renders invisible, black women's literary productions in the history of Brazilian letters.

Despite the current popular assumption that African-Brazilians lack a sense of collective identity and political consciousness as a racial group, African-Brazilians possess a long history of both these elements as expressed in literature, culture and politics. The African-Brazilian literature of today represents a point on the continuum of

a history of resistance in a term I borrow from Clóvis Moura called *quilombagem*,<sup>30</sup> a constellation of movements of protest having as its organizational center the *quilombo*, from which departed various other forms of rebellion (33). Throughout African-Brazilian history, the cultural and political aspects of African Brazilian culture have variously operated in tandem as well as separately, attempting to negotiate strategies of resistance and social advancement. The struggle for African-Brazilians to possess a voice, to speak their own experiences, is ongoing.

In the twentieth century, the development of the independent black press provided a degree of authorial autonomy and a forum for black life in the city of São Paulo. From 1911-1963, black writers began the *Imprensa Negra* [Black Press] developed by journalists and writers specifically to develop a sense of black community and consciousness (Moura). Around the same time, in 1931 to 1937, the *Frente Negra Brasileira* [Black Brazilian Front] was created to unite the masses of African-descended peoples in the struggle for citizenship, and the *Imprensa Negra* began to function as an organ of this political movement. It managed to become a political party in 1936, but was dissolved, along with all other political parties, when the Vargas regime instituted the *Estado Novo* [New State] (Moura). These efforts express a mode of resistance through black affirmation and collective social and political maneuvering that showed every promise of continued success until governmental interference disarmed it.

More recently, in the 1980s, the spirit of the *Frente Negra Brasileira* [Black Brazilian Front] re-emerged with the *Movimento Negro do Brasil* [Black Movement of

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<sup>30</sup> This term originates in the era of slavery when escapees would form fugitive communities called *quilombos*, the equivalent of Jamaican maroon communities.

Brazil], consisting of numerous social and political organizations such as the Movimento Negro Unificado [Black Unified Movement], SOS Racismo [SOS Racism], and the Centro de Articulação de Populações Marginalizadas, [Center for the Expression of Marginalized Populations] "combining explicitly political, antiracist agendas in their struggle for the social, economic, and cultural emancipation of Brazil's black population" (Hanchard 119-129).<sup>31</sup> The black movement was thus reignited in the 1970s and intensified into the 1980's, fueled by discontent with military rule and influenced by the social and political gains made by blacks in the United States during the 60's and 70's (Crook & Johnson 2).

A core of black Brazilian intellectuals and activists began to publicly assert "that their exclusion from socioeconomic advancement was due mainly to their race" and began to organize themselves for the fight against racial discrimination in Brazil (Hanchard 111). While a number of those involved in the MN began to conceptualize Brazil's pattern of discrimination and oppression as racial, it was and continues to be a struggle to unite the masses along the lines of a racial discourse because the official discourse has been so adept at de-racializing oppression and a-politicizing African-descended history and culture. Michael Hanchard's frustration with the culturalist approach as a liberation ideology in the MN reflects this concern with the society's appropriation of African folkloric cultural practices as distinctly (and proudly) "Brazilian" while doing little to advance the African-descended population in any way or to improve their political and social conditions (Hanchard 9). African-Brazilian culture becomes "stripped of racial and political implications," as everyone participates as

"Brazilians" and the progenitors of the culture still do not benefit (Crook & Johnson 10). The political expediency of African-Brazilian culture needs to be actualized, from his perspective.<sup>32</sup>

It appears that members of the relatively recently developed black writers movement would agree with this need to politicize all aspects of black cultural activity, literature included. The black writer's movement is a direct outgrowth of the black movement. It embraces the idea and development of a specifically "African-Brazilian literature" that is at once cultural and political in its aim of speaking out against oppression against the darker population in the social struggle, but also addresses issues directly related to the question of black literature in and of itself (Rowell 757). It is for this reason that African-descended writers of literature have recently begun to identify themselves as specifically "black writers" developing a consciously "black" or "African-Brazilian" literature. Éle Semog in his interview for the special African-Brazilian edition of *Callaloo* literary magazine comments:

We had to inaugurate a new way of speaking, we had to break away from a discourse, we had to break away from the educated norm, we had to create an ontological other within literature. It was as if we had to recodify all of Brazilian letters... We all were committed to creating a black literature that opposed the educated norm, that opposed white Brazilians' representations of black people in literature... There was a commitment of militancy. (Rowell 757)

This political consciousness led to the formation of black activist-writing groups such as *Grupo de Escritores Negros* de Salvador and another out of Rio de Janeiro, (both of

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<sup>32</sup> Despite Hanchard's critique of the co-optation of the African aspects of culture as simply Brazilian and therefore stripped of politically subversive potential, many cultural organizations such as those associated with Carnival, like Ilê-Ayê, have an social uplift agenda through after school programs and training programs for youths who stay in school, providing opportunities to enhance their education and develop skills that will provide them some options for survival in Brazilian society.

which are now defunct) and *Quilombhoje* of São Paulo, which began publishing *Cadernos Negros* [Black Notebooks](an annual anthology of poetry and short stories) in 1978 and which continues today.

For black women writers embattled with the question of race, the concern of where and when to address the concerns of gender becomes a question that many of these writers confront in their politics as writers. Black women writers within the movement have acknowledged the significance of establishing a militant black literature, but have noted the challenge of distinctly defining a black feminine perspective and aesthetic. Míriam Alves asserts, "the general tendency of the black woman writer is to engage herself in the man's struggle, calling it a general one. So the specificity of being a woman writer that emerges in the work passes without notice. Even so, women are writing, women are speaking; it's just that they don't manage for this discourse to become respected as a specific expression" (Rowell 803). Given the socio-economic challenges referenced earlier, black women face multiple concerns even beyond this one in the production of their literature. Alves argues, "Without a doubt, the Black woman feels oppression doubly. These conditions [of sex, race, religion and residence of people] are causes for reflection within the Brazilian feminist movement because, for the Black feminine following, 'the racial question is an essential cross section for any area of interest in the matter of women in Brazil,'" (Alves & Durham 23). In addition to the socio-economic factors of writing and publishing, African Brazilian women writers must confront the myriad stereotypes engendered in slavery and continuing today. Afolabi argues, "Dating from the era of slavery, the African-Brazilian woman has been portrayed as a slave, a domestic servant, a mammy, or at best a 'mulatta,' a sexual object whose

function is to satisfy the perverse pleasure of the master..." (117). While some Brazilian writers of alternative histories have ventured to address race and gender issues in their texts,<sup>33</sup> the voices of black writers themselves on these issues seems to go unheard.

**To Be A Black Female Brazilian Science Fiction Writer:  
An Emblematic Experience in Multiple Liminality**

My overarching argument throughout this project is that black women's spiritual epistemological framings re-orient speculative fictions; however, Brazil presents an interesting case in this postulation for a number of reasons. First, as Ginway points out, Brazilian science fiction constitutes the status of a Third World literature in comparative context with mainstream science fiction produced in "First World" countries; that is, they occupy a position of marginality in relation to American hegemony (34). Ginway argues,

In their reformulation of the tropes of science fiction, Brazilian writers offer the perspective of the outsider, reinterpreting familiar [Anglo-American] traditions from a Third World perspective. It is this 'shuttling' between the center and the periphery... that affords them this unique point of view. (209)

This "shuttling" between center and periphery references the Brazilian's ability to read and engage both English and Portuguese texts, enriching the possibilities for science fiction with this "outsider" perspective more so than their American counterparts, who read only English-language authors, and therefore lack a certain kind of critical perspective. This unique position Bráulio Tavares attributes to Brazil's Third World, marginal status. However, this dialectic engages only those mainstream American science fiction works written by white men and includes as its readership only those white Brazilian elites who read both English and Portuguese. If Ginway's assertion is accurate,

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<sup>33</sup> See M. Elizabeth Ginway's "Vampires, Werewolves and Strong Women: alternate histories or the re-writing of race and gender in Brazilian history" in *Extrapolation* (Sept. 22, 2003).

an examination on the basis of liminal science fictions may reveal more interesting commonalities between black speculative fictions in the U.S. and Brazilian science fiction as a “Third World” literature, generally, than a comparison between the white male elite of each country. The effect of “displacement” that Ginway suggests occurs with the production of science fiction in a Third World country like Brazil runs parallel with my argument that black speculative fictions in the U.S. occupy a liminal status from which they offer social and cultural critique.

Brazilian science fiction and literature generally appropriate the folkloric (read: African) contributions of culture, a strategy that has “traditionally been used by populist leaders to foment a sense of nationalism and national identity” (Ginway 190). Brazil’s identity as a nation is so pervasively African in its folk cultural manifestations (samba, capoeira, candomblé) that Brazilian national identity is already Othered in relation to the largely white, masculine representation of U.S. national identity and literary renderings. Ginway argues that the Brazilian science fiction of the sixties is subversive in its representation of Brazil as black and feminine instead of masculine and white, embracing a supposedly marginal status and articulating a polarity between the supposedly superior American mainstream science fiction characterized by masculinity, reason and technology, and the allegedly inferior Brazilian mainstream science fiction characterized by femininity, intuition and nature (71). Technology is regarded as a foreign neo-colonialist imposition. This oppositional stance is utilized to critique the advancement of technology and the processes of modernization as an exteriorly imposed destination for Brazil as a nation. In this context, traditional science fiction icons such as the alien, the robot, the spaceship, the industrialized city and its converse, the urban wasteland, are

transformed in an act of resistance against alien practices of modernization in an effort to maintain Brazilian culture and humanistic traditions (88).

Additionally, Brazil's dystopian fiction of the 1970s demonstrates the "myth of Brazilianness" employed in struggle against the state military regime with its policies of enforced modernization, constituting a turn inwards to the politics of domestic hegemony as opposed to the concern with the status of Brazilian national identity in global relations. Ginway argues that the myths of Brazilian identity constituted within representations of nature, the environment, and the portrayal of women are used as "symbols of opposition to the dictatorship's modernization policies" (91). Idealized stereotypes of Brazil, wherein the "Edenic" tropical landscape figures prominently, frequently operates in terms of the feminine and posits this image as a more authentic identity than the modern technocratic state promulgated by the military regime. This notion of authentic Brazilian identity, tied to a discourse of an inherently black, female, naturalized landscape in direct contrast and conflict with technology and modernity coincides with discourses that situate blacks in an idealized, immutable past that renders them incapable of moving into modernity with the rest of humankind. This discourse, therefore, unwittingly reifies the erasure of black subjectivities as modern subjects, assuming that technological advances would necessarily (and inauthentically) whiten Brazilian national identity, destroying the distinction of racial hybridity that has become a mainstay of their identity.

Thus, Brazilian science fiction of this era postulates a national identity that appropriates the convergence of blackness, femininity and nature to protest the hegemony of the technocratic regime while simultaneously reifying racialized hierarchies by posing the "authentic" idealized national identity as black, feminine, and natural and in direct



opposition to modernity as white, masculine, and technological. Further, in articulating this sense of Brazilian identity as intrinsically black, feminine, and natural, the Brazilian Nation then positions itself, relative to other nations, as a less-developed nation that nonetheless competes with “first world” nations such as the United States, positing themselves in an outsider position that critiques the perceived faith in the virtues of technology embraced by more developed nations. Further, this Africanized and feminized identity is appropriated to challenge the Nation’s internal repression and technocratic, economic development policies under the military regime of the 1970s and 1980s. In short, these identity myths are utilized to articulate a moral authority against hegemonic forces, be they international or domestic in nature.

Mainstream Brazilian writers of science fiction espouse a third-world perspective of the genre as a foreign, or alien, if you will, model. Writer and critic Ivan Carlos Regina, in his “The Brazilian Science Fiction Cannibalist Manifesto—Supernova Movement,” argues for “the active subversion of foreign literary models” (mainly white American and European icons, tropes, and methods), “eschewing a blind reverence to the technological societies from which they emerged, remaking them and perhaps reformulating the genre itself” (Ginway 141). Thus, as a dialogue between the white male dominant elite of “first world” developed countries (the U.S. and England) and the white male dominant elite of a “third world” or developing country, Brazilian science fiction writers take on the oppositional stance that I argue black and women writers make within the U.S. as “marginalized” writers within the genre. This dialectic between first world and third world national literary production highlights the effects of globalization and the

inherently unequal and hierarchical power relations between developed and developing nations as well as among classes within Brazilian society (Tomlinson 61-62).

The appropriation of black femininity, then, produces an interesting contrast in the discussion of black women's science fiction as a multiply liminal discourse cross-culturally. To be a Brazilian writer of science fiction is to already assume a liminal position in relation to the dominance of Euro-American and British science fiction. Further, to be a black female writer of Brazilian science fiction is to occupy the status of a multiply liminal positioning based on the intersections of race, gender, class, and national affiliation.

The marginalized statuses of science fiction in Brazil and of African Brazilian literatures converge to constitute a multiply liminal discourse in Aline França's African-Brazilian feminine science fiction text. By all accounts of the complexities entailed above, *A Mulher de Aleduma* is not supposed to exist. Yet, out of the myriad difficulties and challenges, we have an example of a science fiction novel written by an African-Brazilian woman by which we can broaden the conversations generated by black women's speculative fictions cross-culturally. As has been discussed, science fiction has been dominated by white men in Brazil as well as the United States. França's contribution as a black woman in Brazil, where conditions for black women in general would seem to preclude engagement with writing such a white male-dominated genre, marks a significant political act within the already established tradition of African-Brazilian resistance. "I wanted to show that Black people can do more than play soccer and dance the samba. We have great intelligence, too," states França (interview with the author). *A Mulher de Aleduma* can be said to provide reclamation of the black female body from

service to the nation in an effort to, first and foremost, liberate the image of black women from the internal hegemonic structures that symbolically appropriate and debase black women to advance the cause of the nation.

In addition to the appropriation of black femininity as symbolic of Brazilian nationhood, African-based religious traditions also become sources of inspiration for creation of “authentic” Brazilian identity and literature. An examination of França's text reveals the ways in which black femininity is reclaimed and hybrid African spirituality is constructed in opposition to the Brazilian nationalist ideology as a dialogue between the white elites of First World and Third World and asserts, instead, an African sensibility as the key to not only black liberation at the local level, but to the salvation of a world on the verge of environmental crisis.

In França's text, black feminine subjective identity distinguishes itself from the homogenizing rhetoric of Brazilian national identity by establishing and embracing an alternative origin and evolution of African-descended people with values perpetuated by African women in direct opposition to the ideals of the mainstream, non-Black Brazilian citizenry. The specificity of African-Brazilian consciousness is iconized in the diasporic space of the *quilombo*-like island rather than the nation writ large, and technology is not so much envisioned as inherently adversarial as it is understood to be misappropriated for oppressive ends. African-Brazilian women reclaim, reconstitute, and perpetuate African-Brazilian spirituality as an integral part of African-Brazilian identity, shaping the alternative ideology espoused in distinction against nationalist ideologies. The interplay of subjectivity, space, and spirituality within the text converge in the reformulation of mythology and science fiction into a new generic form that I term indigenous history,

wherein dichotomies typically inherent in myth and science fiction are resolved in service to a hybrid African ideology

The text begins with a competition on the planet of Ignum to determine which couple from a race of Negro aliens will populate Earth. The male and female winners from the competitions travel to Earth to meet Old Aleduma, one of the Gods from Ignum sent to prepare Earth for their arrival in an Eden-like setting. França takes great care to describe the unique physical and advanced mental attributes of the race of alien Negros and the physical evolution of their descendents on Earth over millennia until the present time. The period of slavery in the history of the Negros is glossed over, and posits slavery as the impetus for being driven from Eden and the retreat of one group of blacks to the Island of Aleduma, where the majority of the text takes place. Juxtaposed to the Island of Aleduma is the Big City, representative of the modern concerns of neo-colonialism facing the people of Aleduma, and by extension, all people of African descent. The people of Aleduma are liminally situated, for while people from the Big City do not know of their existence until they visit the Island to try to mine its natural resources and convert it to an island resort, Maria Vitória, the wife of Old Aleduma, possesses access to information and knowledge of occurrences within the broader world through her telepathic connection with the ancestral gods and goddesses of Ignum, who enable her to mentally monitor all Earthly occurrences. The people of Ignum and Aleduma are posited as central to the salvation of Earth, on its way to destruction through reckless depletion of natural resources and unbridled economic greed. The book closes with the invitation of blacks on Earth to join in an intergalactic congress of the planets being called by the goddess of Ignum, Salópia, to determine the fate of the Earth.

The text as a whole struggles against the stereotypes and subaltern positions assigned to black people, challenging the specific stereotypes present in Brazilian culture and proposing a black ideology in opposition to mainstream Brazilian ideology. The image of the black woman as subaltern servant—sexual, domestic or otherwise—is challenged through a representation of female characters that conflate service with power. The spiritual-religious dimensions of the ideology espoused within the text are central to this reconfiguration of subaltern defenselessness to a status of liminal power. The ultimate implications of black female subjectivity recast through the agency of spiritual-religious discourse moves beyond the provincial grapplings of a Brazilian nation in competition with other nation-states to a global concern with the impact of environmental and social desecration wrought by neo-colonial, hegemonic ideologies and behaviors that ultimately have international and even intergalactic implications which threaten to destroy Earth.

### **Reclaiming Black Womanhood**

The character of Maria Vitória, who is the wife of Aleduma to which the title refers, represents a challenge to multiple notions of the status of black women in Brazilian society. The subjects of the role of black women as spiritual leaders, as sexual beings, and as mothers are engaged within her character to present an alternative vision of black female identity in direct opposition to the stereotyped images and subaltern position attributed to them in society as poor, uneducated, sexual objects. Further, the character of Maria Vitória contrasts with the *graúnas*, another species of female beings with whom the people of Aleduma share the island, and against whom the qualities of

black female subjectivity are contrasted to highlight the positive attributes of black femininity.

*The Spiritual Leadership of Black Women*

Maria Vitória's status as the wife of Aleduma is, first and foremost, a religious/spiritual role to which she is elected to serve as intermediary and messenger between the ancestors/gods/goddesses of Ignum and their earthly descendents on the Island of Aleduma. Her role as Aleduma's wife is portrayed as largely functional; as messages from Ignum regarding the activities of Earth increase, he requires a help with receiving the messages. The idea of marriage in Yoruba and other West African cultures constitutes an acknowledgement of relationships between lineages, in a general sense (Oyěwùmí 51). In becoming the wife of a god of Ignum, Old Aleduma, she is, thus elevated to the status of a goddess among the people of Earth and establishes the connection between the extra-terrestrial ancestors and earthly descendents, despite the genetic changes that have occurred to create two apparently distinct beings. Maria Vitória's goddess status is characterized by having received "the power" from Ignum, which increases her mental capacity to register events at a great distance. In fact, this mental capacity is one of the things that distinguishes the ancestors on Ignum from their descendents on Earth, and the text suggests that the diminished mental capacities and physical transformations of the earth descendents are attributable to peculiarities in the environment (França 12). While her mental capacity is elevated to that of the people of Ignum, Maria Vitória retains her human physicality, activities and obligations, establishing her as both human and divine.

The role of women as spiritual leaders in Brazil, particularly in the African-Brazilian religions of candomblé and umbanda, has been remarked upon as an overwhelmingly female-dominated practice in the history of Africans in Brazil. Ruth Landes' *Cidade das Mulheres* (City of Women, 1947), an early ethnographic study of race and gender in the practice of candomblé, is one of the landmark studies that engages the specifically gendered and racialized manifestation of the Yoruba-based religion in Brazil. Professor Maria Jose argues that “the relationship between men and women in candomblé is a partnership” and Mãe Cleo Martins affirms,

Orisha worship in Africa is a religion for both men and women, both have equal status. The Babalorisha, the father through the Orisha, is the same as the Iyalorisha, who is the high priestess and mother through the orisha. Except that in Bahia... it was the women's turn to shine, which was very different from the female role in the Catholic Church, where women are still inferior to men. (film, *A Cidade das Mulheres*)

Professor Maria Jose adds,

In this regard, I think Candomblé is a great example of innovation, of an alternative lifestyle within a patriarchal society, because society as a whole is still patriarchal. However, within Candomblé temples, women have power without being matriarchal per se, in the sense of oppressing or excluding men. Women have power, they have visibility. They determine what comes before and after them, but without negating the male principle (film, *A Cidade das Mulheres*)

Thus, through the practice of candomblé, African-Brazilian women locate a source of power and independence that transcends the patriarchal system that non-Black Brazilian women have struggled against throughout the twentieth century (Ferreira-Pinto 1).

More recently, various authors have engaged the significance of candomblé as one of the first examples of black resistance, next to the activities of the quilombos, or runaway/free slave communities. Maria Joaquim argues that candomblé is “consistiu no

espaco em que o negro preservou suas tradicoes e conservou sua identidade afro-brasileira” [constituted in the space in which the negro preserved his traditions and African-Brazilian identity] (16). In Brazil, women were the leaders in preserving the traditions of the Yoruba/Fon religions, and possess a strong place in the preservation of religion and of African culture. The *mãe-de-santo* (mother of the saint), the highest-ranking participant in the community of candomblé, possesses the following characteristics: 1) she is elected by the Orixá to be initiated as a mother of the saint; and 2) the initiated is transformed into a new person, with a different comportment owing to her identification with the Orixá (Joaquim 111). She possesses two functions as a religious, cultural, and social leader; on the one hand, she serves a function as a mediator, or the connection between the Orixá and the black community (112); “por outra lado, precisara reatualizar a cultura afro-brasileira, de maneira a propiciar que os negros preservem suas identidades, que se encontram na sintese entre a Africa idealizada e o cotidiano vivenciado pelas pessoas” [on the other hand, she modernizes African-Brazilian culture to provide a manner in which blacks preserve their identities, which collides in a synthesis between an idealized Africa and the daily lives of the people] (Joaquim 113-114). Thus, the syncretism for which Brazilian candomblé is famous, has come to symbolize an integrating discourse on a number of levels that highlights the adaptability of Africans to their social circumstances. For many followers of candomblé, the syncretism with the saints of Catholicism as a survival strategy remains a strong sign of this adaptability throughout slavery, post-abolition, and continuing today.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the practice of candomblé is not monolithic; now that the practice of the religion has become largely de-stigmatized in the past twenty years or so, many practitioners are calling for an end to syncretism (a survival strategy to appease the oppressive measures of the dominant slavocracy and post-



The character of Maria Vitória is constituted as both spiritual wife and mother. She possesses the characteristics of a mãe-de-santo and Old Aleduma, that of an Orixá.<sup>35</sup> Maria Vitória is elected by the gods and goddesses of Aleduma, and undergoes a transformation that elevates her mental capacity to that of her ancestors (França 19). She serves the function of a mediator between the goddesses and gods of Ignum and the people of the Island of Aleduma, and also serves as the preserver of their culture in the face of challenges from the *graúnas*, with whom they share the island. When the *graúnas* attempt to kidnap Mucujai, one of the elderly residents of the Island of Aleduma, Maria Vitória's authority as the wife of Old Aleduma is sufficient to release Mucujai and to drive them back to their cave (França 25). Thus, even the *graúnas*, despite their offensive behavior, respect the power of Old Aleduma and Maria Vitória as leaders of the people of Aleduma. Maria Vitória's power as spiritual and community leader is thus reaffirmed throughout the text.

#### *Sexual and Spiritual Integration*

Maria Vitória also challenges the stereotype of black women as domestic and sexual servants. As Esmerald Ribeiro argues, "...time has always left us behind the curtains, camouflaging us generally in domestic work" (Álves 23). The stereotypes that Cristina Ferreira-Pinto outlines in her *Gender, Discourse and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature* would seem to place Black women outside the politics of gender and sexuality that constitute the framework for her text. Her stereotypes

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emancipation leadership against African practices) and a return to the strictly African roots of the religion. See articles on and books published by Mãe Stella de Oxossi, Iyalorisha (candomblé priestess) renowned for renouncing the idea of African-Catholic religious syncretism.

<sup>35</sup> General name for a god in the Yoruba pantheon.

of female sexuality include the sensual mulatta, the seductive/unfaithful woman, the pure white married woman, and lesbians as perverted or frustrated women (8). She merely gestures towards the difficulties Black women in Brazil face, colonizing their struggles by her simultaneous alignment of white middle to upper class women's issues with Black women's Othered position while refusing to engage it in any significant way within the text by asserting, "Brazilian Black women—as well as Brazilian women in general—have been mostly reduced to the position of Other, excluded from dominant discourse" (25). She continues the pattern of exclusion by failing to address the ways in which Black women are also represented, if at all, in the literary tradition of women writers. However, Alves argues that "as far as Black women are concerned, we know that in the past because of the institution of slavery they were submitted to all kinds of inhuman, sexual, servile exploitation; separated from their children, murdered, raped, and persecuted when they tried to liberate themselves from oppression" (Alves & Durham 21). As the inheritance of slave culture dictates, the historical violence of sexual imposition enacted against black women is manifested in its contemporary implications for the ways in which Black women continue to be treated today, with domestic work and prostitution representing the highest percentage of Black women's work in Brazil.

Thus, the character of Maria Vitória as a sexual being is mediated by her primary status as a spiritual leader, which requires virginity and purity, and an extended courtship period with her future husband, Tadeu, in which they communicate telepathically through a dream-state. Tadeu represents a kind of prodigal son to the people of Aleduma, having been essentially abducted from his Black biological parents and reared by rich white folks. He is the chief executive officer of a multinational corporation, Abrantes &

Abrantes, and his adoptive father continually references the fact that his business is growing due to the superior mental capacity and managerial skills of Tadeu. When Tadeu begins to experience a fever that signals his telepathic communications with Maria Vitória, his family thinks he is experiencing a mental breakdown and arranges for him to see a psychologist, who recommends the vacation that will lead him to Maria Vitória on the Island. Firm in his belief in the reality of what he is experiencing, he engages Maria Vitória whenever she appears to him.

The nature of Maria Vitória and Tadeu's courtship challenges the historical sexual narrative in which black women have been characterized as sexual aggressors or predators whose hypersexuality presents an irresistible temptation to the lust of men, placing responsibility for the sexual encounter and any outcome from it squarely in the black woman's lap. By establishing a disembodied courtship that focuses on a mental and spiritual connection first, França enables a subsequent erotic discourse that neither casts Maria Vitória as sexual aggressor and seductress nor subjugates her within the boundaries of patriarchal dominance/submission sexual binaries. In fact, her virginity and purity, which is repeatedly emphasized in the text, remains intact even after their marriage, which occurs immediately following their first face-to-face meeting. Tadeu must leave immediately after the ceremony because Tadeu's former business partner, Hermano (whose daughter expected to marry him), will want to exact revenge.

The character of Hermano reveals a number of imperialistic, hegemonic forces including neo-colonial domination, capitalist greed, and white male privilege and sexual aggression against black women. Throughout the text, descriptions of Maria Vitória and other female characters indicate nudity as the normative practice on the Island of

Aleduma. Written from the perspective of the people of Aleduma, little attention is drawn to this fact. The first time that the reader becomes aware of this is during a religious invocation to the gods and goddesses of Ignium who have come to choose a second wife for Old Aleduma (16). The second time attention is drawn to this fact occurs when strangers from the Big City come to visit the island and see “the natives” through the eyes of colonizers: “Look, Eleonora! Naked women carrying water!” The conversation that ensues between cousins Bibiana and Eleonora debates the significance and desirability of the black women they have just seen:

“Father’s mariners are truly sadists. They are going to become sick with... What! But they are insignificant women, without beauty and uneducated.”

“You are mistaken, my dear cousin, they look like women from the African kingdom... It is a pure nudity. Shall we speak to them?” and shortly afterwards Bibiana shouted, “Hey! My name is Bibiana. This is Eleonora. And what are your names?”

No response was made. Eleonora was the first to speak, perceiving Bibiana's disappointment. "They are truly cannibals from hell." (44)  
[Translation mine]

The conversation underscores the mainstream associations of African subjectivity with ignorance, repulsiveness, and primitivism, highlighting the contradiction between the dominant attitude that simultaneously renders black women physically repugnant yet sexually irresistible.

The sadistic behaviors of white men toward black women within the text is illustrated in a series of encounters with the strangers from the Big City and the people of Aleduma. Shortly after their arrival, Hermano’s workers follow Irisan and attempt to rape her; Father Ibero falls victim to their abuse as well in his attempt to hide Irisan. The

attempted rape fails as the men are stunned by a protective energy sent from Saint Anthony.

The second instance of sexual aggression occurs immediately following the attempted rape of Irisan. Hermano continues the sadistic behavior where his workers left it. As the two are turned away from the house of Father Ibero, the crowd congregated outside awaits answers regarding the men's presence and behavior. Standing in the midst of the crowd, Hermano reveals the connection between himself and the two men who are his workers, demanding to know what has happened to them. Introducing himself as the owner of the Island, he announces his plans to turn it into a nude beach resort. When none of the residents express surprise at his revelation, he assumes that they think he miraculously emerged from the sea, echoing the first colonial encounters of imperial colonizers with the "new world" natives. This time, however, the people of Aleduma are fully aware of who these strangers are and their intentions to deplete the natural resources of the island, as well as the extended period of spying engaged by Hermano and his cronies in his submarine, the *Gritus III*. Bernardo, Maria Vitória's brother, informs him that they are aware of his actions over the past several months as well as his intentions for the island. Bernardo tells him that Maria Vitória is endowed by Old Aleduma with the ability to register facts from a great distance and refused further details. Convinced that Old Aleduma is a human informant, he attempts to force more information out of Maria Vitória:

"...are you the one to whom the wizard revealed the existence of my submarines?" While he spoke, he seized Maria Vitória's pert breasts, making her wail with pain and, torturing her still more with his words, said, "I like to see a female groan and shout from pain in my arms. Rough

sex makes me feel good. I feel pleasure at seeing the blood of a Negro roll in my hands, like this, like this...” (35)

Even though Bernardo is able to fight Hermano off of his sister during this violation, Hermano’s final attempt at rape is successful. Hermano, who has taken up residence on the island and made a pretense of penitence and reconciliation for his earlier behavior, feels that he and his daughter have been slighted when Tadeu marries Maria Vitória rather than his daughter. Not merely satisfied with the rape of the island through his economic development and resource extraction exploits Hermano exerts what little power he has left through the vindictive act of rape.

Thus, these patriarchal and hegemonic forces reveal the historical aggressive depravity of white men in their interactions with black women that, in the context of the novella, present a persistent threat to black femininity. The construction of the character of Maria Vitória reveals a rejection of the old image of the centripetal force of the black women’s vagina and constructs white men as possessing attitudes ranging from sophomoric voyeurism towards nudity to the abusive and cowardly display of power through rape against the most powerful women on the island.

### *Mother Love*

The role of motherhood within the text highlights, in yet another dimension, the historical terroristic violation of white men against black women. Maria Vitória becomes pregnant as the result of the rape by Hermano; her purity, which had been a constantly referenced characteristic throughout the novel, is compromised and she carries the child to term in spite of the manner in which she conceived. Because of the high value placed upon child-bearing as “the *raison d’etre* of human existence” and the understanding of

children as blessings in Yoruba culture (Oyèwùmí 53), the safe-guarding of children and their health supercedes the desire to purge the effects of the violation. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, Maria Vitória says:

"The earth nourishes her children. It does not matter that he be a brute, miserable, bloodthirsty. She offers the nourishment from her great breast, shelter with her motherly warmth, but the men don't recognize this, and bring discord within her; they don't respect Mother Earth, who asks mercy for all of humanity."

Dona Catilê responded, "I know that you are going to love and nourish your son, without concern for the qualities of the man that fathered him. Is this what you mean to say?"

"Yes, Dona Catilê. I won't hate this child." (72)

Hermano's rape of Maria Vitória is an attempt to enact some type of dominance and power over Maria Vitória and the people of the Island by revealing their spiritual leader as any another vulnerable, powerless female. All of his earlier attempts to establish dominance over the "primitives" of the Island have failed, and his final act of frustration seeks to diminish the power of Maria Vitória by raping her and giving her a "bastard" child, as the outcome would indicate in Catholic religious discourse. Yet, even though the child would, biologically speaking, belong to Hermano, this fact would not diminish Maria Vitória if one considers the situation from an African-based standpoint. Assuming marriage customs and paternity rights are consistent with Yoruba practice, the child would not have been a "bastard," which Western standards would assume would be a primary source of concern for its social implications. Rather, Tadeu would be regarded as the father of the child because of the paternal rights conferred upon him through the act of marriage (Oyèwùmí 52). The real social problematic, in this case, was the attempt to diminish the power and respect of one of the island's leaders through sexual violation, and the introduction of negative energy (França 71) into the revered and careful process

of procreation. According to Oyěwùmí, the purpose of marriage in Yoruba epistemology is to procreate, and to establish sexual and paternity rights for the male; in this process, the lineage of each family is carefully considered in making matches, because “marriage into the wrong family could introduce hereditary diseases into the family, and this would affect their own or their children’s marriage chances” (53). This factor of congenital health issues seems to be played out in the subsequent death of the infant born to Maria Vitória. All the people of Aleduma drink the “sap of life” from a local tree, which prolongs their lives; they are given seven gulps at birth and seventy gulps when they turn seventy years old. The child chokes on the first gulps of the sap of life, indicating that he was not, perhaps, genetically conditioned to receive the sap as the offspring of Hermano.

Thus, the role of motherhood continues to be revered, regardless of Hermano’s attempt to diminish Maria Vitória’s humanity and her womanhood. She remains a spiritual mother in her role as a *mãe-de-santo*, and her commitment to her role as biological mother despite the circumstances of the conception only serves to further establish her resiliency and power as spiritual leader. After the child dies, she establishes a memorial under the tree of life in an act of remembrance for every child born of rape (França 79). Shortly after this scene, Maria Vitória becomes pregnant by her husband, and a son, Datigum, is born within the ideal conditions of love between conjugal partners, completing the circle of full female subjectivity in her role as a biological mother.

Aside from the reconfiguration of white male/black female historical sexual narratives, França articulates the notion of Black femininity in contradistinction to non-Black feminine discourse as represented in the construction of the *graúnas*. The *graúnas* are described as hyper-female women, possessing rows of breasts from which a red liquid



runs when aroused. Their lineage/heritage is suggested to be European, a rebel group of Greek-descendent women: “[The historical records state that] the origin of the *graúnas* dates from many millennia ago and that some of these women transformed into centaurs, except that not all of them accepted this metamorphosis” (França 81). In Greek mythology, centaurs are always male. The rejection of this metamorphosis constitutes reclamation of feminine identity, but the *graúnas* seem to have overcorrected and, consequently, constitute a culture wherein matriarchal oppressive behaviors are substituted for patriarchal ones. These many-breasted women, always mounted on horses each time they appear in the text, kidnap old men and male strangers to work as slaves in their cave, where they force the men to serve them and engage in acts of bestiality for their entertainment (França 24). It is suggested that their present-day behavior against men is retaliatory and indiscriminating, avenging themselves against the acts of their former King of Coinjá, who performed circumcision on girls once they reached the age of twelve (França 81). They reject the role of motherhood, particularly for male boys, and when a son is born, they leave him to die. In fact, the *graúna* is a kind of bird known as the rice grackle in English, which is one of the rare species of birds “whose members are determined to get something for nothing, and avoid all labor in the rearing of their offspring.” The South American rice grackle is known to lay its eggs in the nest of another bird of a related species whose eggs closely resemble their own, thereby avoiding parental activities until the eggs are hatched and the surrogate bird-mother ejects the foreign hatchlings from the nest (Hornaday 171).

The *graúnas* maintain an allegiance to the spirit of the dead (and cruel) former King of Coinjá, but it is an allegiance born of fear. The *graúnas* believe that they must

pay homage to his spirit, otherwise he will make the waters of the sea grow, and they possess a fear of water (França 81). His spirit dwells on the island and directs the graúnas to “do disagreeable things,” such as enslave men and force them to engage in bestiality, in a display of perverse and gratuitous sexuality.

Thus, all of the elements that affirm black female subjectivity in the character of Maria Vitória – spiritual connectedness, pure sexuality, and selfless motherhood—are distinctly contrasted with the representation of the graúnas as radical feminists who reify oppressive, hierarchical relations with women in the position of power and men as the denigrated objects. This highlights the apparent balance between the genders in the culture of the people of Aleduma, where neither men nor women abuse the power attributable to each sex, but rather understand the purpose of each one’s roles in the social order. This leads to the analysis of the spiritual epistemology framing the world created by França on the Island of Aleduma.

### **Hybrid African Spiritual Epistemology**

Brazilian religious discourse is most commonly characterized as a syncretism of traditional African religious practices and Western Catholicism, developed as a cultural and social survival strategy by the African-descended populations during slavery. Steven White argues that, historically, the study of religion in Brazil has privileged the Yoruba tradition and the practice of candomblé because researchers believe it is more “intact” than other traditions (80). In fact, religious traditions in Brazil are much more dynamic in terms of the variety of African religious traditions that persist, such as Bantu religions in the region of Minas Gerais, and presence of syncretic practices besides candomblé, such as umbanda. Thus, the various religious references in *A Mulher de Aleduma* play upon

this religious pluralism while asserting a commitment to the African aspects of the traditions despite the universal appeal that Reginaldo Prandi suggests African-Brazilian religions have come to offer all Brazilians regardless of racial or ethnic background (82). On the basis of this assertion, Steven White suggests “the establishment of a collective African-Brazilian identity by means of African-based religion...on a national scale is very problematic” (71). However, the practice of African religions by non-African believers does not make the religion(s) any less “African” than does the practice of the religion of Judaism by non-ethnic Jews render the religion somehow “not Jewish.” This attitude towards religious pluralism as nullifying Black racial/ethnic unity can be understood in much the same way that the racial democracy myth is constructed in terms of “miscegenate-ing” away difference (read: Blackness) into a new identity of Brazilianness. The idea that religious pluralism and the practice of the religion by non-Blacks somehow de-Africanizes the religion seeks to defuse the political significance that African-Brazilian religions have held historically. In França’s text, the combined effect of articulating African-Brazilian religious practices in combination with the selective inclusion of the Catholic Saint Anthony of Categero (their black patron saint), and the articulation of an African cosmogony that closely resonates with the creation story of the Dogon people of Mali counters the Brazilianization process (that syncretizes away the politics of black representation) with an Africanization process.

The establishment of spiritual epistemology as espoused in the text reflects a concern that moves beyond the nationalist impulse of mainstream Brazilian literature to a concern with global issues. This concern is articulated as an inevitable result of the African cosmology that is postulated throughout the text, starting with the belief in their

descent from an original procreant couple who is descended from another planet of mentally superior beings, and with whom they have maintained connection over the millennia. This notion of descending from another planet, or outer space, resonates with the cosmogony of the Dogon people of Mali. Rather than humanity being created out of the dust of the earth, their procreant ancestors originate in the heavens. The Dogon story posits the origin of human life from the contraction of a tiny seed floating in the universe in the locale of the star Sirius A; the seed goes through a seven stage transformation that ultimately culminates in a prototypical being (Azuonye 48). The prototypical being (sky god) mates with Earth (goddess) to create a divine model for humankind, which results in the production of the twin Nommo, representing the balancing attributes of male and female energy and presenting the prototype for male/female interdependency in the continuation of the human species.<sup>36</sup> This originary narrative is the basis for Dogon spiritual practice and epistemology. Attention has been drawn to this narrative in the Western world, however, for the fact that their belief system, in which the status of the star Sirius A and its invisible (to the naked eye) dwarf star Sirius B are so central, has only within the relatively recent history of scientific investigation been verified through technology. Thus, the western world has struggled to scientifically rationalize the Dogon's knowledge, rather than engage the people's own articulation of their knowledge.

França's description of the origins of the black race in the text seem to draw parallels with the Dogon originary narrative, such as the intrinsic connection between the Earth and another heavenly body: "Ignum, a planet of sea, of the most beautiful and

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<sup>36</sup> The Dogon originary narrative is extremely complex, and analyses have delved into the details of its symbolism as a 'primitive' understanding of DNA and genetic evolution.

majestic, exerted a total influence on the Earthly seas. The boldness of the tide here, on Earth, is coordinated with the activity of the sea of Ignum, the king of seas, the beginning and the end of all the seas of the universe. When the tide becomes low on Earth, it is because the sea of Ignum finds itself calm” (França 13). Additionally, they have advanced scientific knowledge as a result of this ancestral connection which “primitives” are not supposed to possess. The Dogon have been described as “isolationist” to the point of being characterized by mainstream researchers as the most primitive (read: culturally intact) group of Africans at the time of their “discovery” in the late 1930s, paralleling the apparent isolation of the people of the Island of Aleduma in order to preserve their knowledge and practices. Ultimately, their understanding of their relationship to this cosmic originary source constitutes the framework of their spiritual epistemology as a people who, because of their continued connectedness to ancestral/celestial knowledge, through both a biological lineage and a spiritual bond, possess a social responsibility to use their knowledge to act upon Old Aleduma’s original dictum to “care well for your land” (França 12).

This lineage and continued connectedness with their progenitors/ancestors endows them with an inherent power of precognition of events that will effect the Earth, and a divine purpose and social responsibility to use that knowledge to save the Earth and all its inhabitants, regardless of race, creed, and so on, from total destruction. Thus, the connection to their origins that endows them with elevated mental capacities far from constitutes them as an insular and isolated people disinterested in the fate of others and concerns with the happenings in the larger world. These capabilities actually require an

engagement with the world insomuch as they are capable of playing an interventive role on behalf of humanity.

First, however, the people of Aleduma must protect and preserve themselves and their culture, since they are the link between the goddesses, gods, and other beings who will determine the fate of Earth and the oblivious, disconnected inhabitants of Earth. The beginning of the text articulates the descent of their progenitors into an Eden-like setting, where Old Aleduma advises them to “be fruitful; care for your land” (França 12). Rather than Eve engendering the exodus from Eden in a fall from grace, however, the Original Sin is postulated as the advent of slavery, “scattering” humanity, and particularly the black race across the globe (França 13). The text indicates this as the point where some of the Blacks escaping slavery take up residence on the Island of Aleduma, formerly called the Island of Coinjá named after the King of the graúnas previously discussed. Thus, the Island of Aleduma is constituted as a quilombo, a site of self-preservation and resistance against destructive hegemonic forces. Throughout the text, various characters express the need to protect themselves and the community, not merely for the sake of self-preservation, but so that they will be able to fulfill the mission that will preserve all of humanity. They realize the lack of respect that the mainstream culture expresses towards them and their culture and attempt to remain discreet. Says Irisan upon being chosen as the second wife of Aleduma, “we should meditate on good thoughts so that the scientists don't discover us; we would be explored until we are depleted of our energy” (França 19). The centrality of social and cultural protection continues throughout the text; the dissemination of a fever by Old Aleduma constitutes a protective energy that reduces the impact of events—in the contemporary case, the advent of commercial/industrial interests

represented in the character of Hermano coming to the island—that would otherwise prove destructive to the people, their customs, and consequently affect their ability to play a role in the salvation of humanity (França 22).

African traditional religions are frequently characterized as “earth-based” religions in that the interconnectedness between all things living (i.e., anything possessing energy, which is everything) is revered. Western ideology views this perspective as “animistic” or nature-worship; but at its most basic level of articulation, it is the enacted respect for all of creation. This outlook is reflected, within the text, in the repeated references to the state of the environment and the deleterious consequences of its abuse and/or neglect. This philosophy is revealed on two separate occasions; the first time, Old Aleduma is discussing the state of Earth with the goddess of Ignium, Salópia:

"Salópia, what of the future of Earth? What should we do to end the violence?" asked Old Aleduma. And Salópia responded,

"We had many meetings with other galaxies and Earth was the topic most discussed. We decided to organize a congress when the sun enters the constellation of Aquarius. We are going to invite many lands for their opinion. For example, Venus is very worried about the toxicity and the violence. Saturn made commentary about the pollution. Uranus shouted about the plants and animals. Mars didn't give an opinion. Unhappily, he is a different planet from the others, and they kept their head lowered examining his clothing of iron." (França 43)

This dialogue places Earth in a position of broader accountability, not merely unto itself and the people inhabiting it, but to an intergalactic audience who, evidently, feels the state of Earth is relevant enough to their own welfare to organize a congress come to a collective determination about how to deal with the problems cited.

Another reference to the sanctity of life in all its forms occurs when the strangers from the Big City come to the island and attempt to learn more about the “locals.”

Bibiana, constructed as a genuinely and benignly curious student of their culture, makes friends with Bernardo, who points out that the people in the big city have cut down almost all of the trees that produce the sap of life that the people of Aleduma have used throughout the generations to prolong their lives:

"Old Aleduma became disappointed when he saw you all from the big city cutting down such trees. In your world, this plant is almost extinct" [said Bernardo]

"But they, I mean, we, in the civilized world, don't know whether or not this plant is of such great importance to humanity, and because of this, they were cut down," said Bibiana, admiring the fruits of the tree.

Suddenly, she was frightened by the shouts of Bernardo: "All trees are of great use in the life of men! You all destroy them, and they moan, feeling profound pain." Making a great pause Bernardo continued, "Excuse me, we here in Aleduma understand things differently than the people from the big city." (França 50)

This protest against the destruction of the tree of life out of ignorance and disrespect provides a parallel articulation of the same type of destruction of (African) people and their ways of life that colonialist hegemonic powers perpetuate, represented by the strangers from the big city. The strangers' reckless greed and disrespect for life in all its manifestations, whether symbolized in an almost extinct tree or the colonizing efforts to "westernize" Other cultures, ultimately ends in the destruction of the very things that could save their lives. Thus, the articulation, preservation of, and continued connection to African culture and spiritual epistemology are central factors in the preservation of the earth and all people and things living in it and connected to it. An African subjectivity rooted in the religious/spiritual discourse of various black spiritual traditions (Dogon creation narrative, Yoruba religious structures and rituals, and to a lesser extent the invocation of the Christian black Saint Anthony) creates an alternative hybrid, African



diasporic discourse of resistance in the Brazilian context to specifically counter the nationalistic Brazilian master narrative that promotes a process of whitening.

### **Quilombagem: The Construction of African-Brazilian Diasporic Space**

Preservation of African religio-spiritual heritage and identities, given the homogenizing attitudes prevalent in Brazilian culture, requires radical, resistant maneuvering to engender *communitas* in the icon of the quilombo. The term quilombo references the historical community of fugitive slaves and other oppressed groups during the era of Brazilian slavery. França's conceptualizations of liberating space and liberatory activity reveal a multi-phased evolution of changed relationships to "home" spaces for African-descended peoples throughout the text, supporting the notion of a hybrid African-ness in the process of historical change across time and space. The final phase in these shifts engenders a process of quilombagem, a constellation of practices stemming from counterhegemonic activity outside the space of the oppressive society to enact liberation. The process of quilombagem enacts the reclamation, reassertion, and reaffirmation of the African basis of African-Brazilian identity. França's articulation of the people of Aleduma's movements across space and time highlights the consistency with which the inevitability of change, whether natural, voluntary, or forced, is accompanied by adaptation without surrendering the specificity of the African attributes of culture. The constellation of movements characterized by 1) migration from space (Ignus) to populate the Earth to 2) the dispersal (forced movement) out of Eden/Africa, the "originary home" on Earth by the advent of slavery to 3) the escape from slavery to the Island of Aleduma (quilombo) present various relationships to land, community,

home and belonging through the immigrant alien, the diasporic slave, and the quilombola.<sup>37</sup>

The discourse of Diaspora deals with estrangement and dislocation from an imagined home or community. Binaries of authentic originary cultures versus re-invented or reclaimed connections to the past and/or the creation of new, hybrid statuses resulting from this loss and disconnection from home in contact with new cultures are among the various strategies that seek to reconcile articulation of subjectivities in the diasporic context. The notion of change (and the degree of trauma enacted therein) as a pivotal factor in the destruction and/or reconstruction of African subjectivities in the diaspora seems to underlie the dialogue on loss, dislocatedness, and inauthenticity. This idea of change, however, suggests that change is not an always already factor for (“primitive,” especially) cultures, situating the Other as a relic of the past in relation to the modernity of Western cultures. However, change is an inevitable part of human existence, and it continues to be such, whether the change be traumatically forced, as with the dispersal of Africans during the slave trade, or not. What constitutes the pivotal factor in the ultimate outcome of diaspora existence is the development of a diasporic consciousness, which factors in the perception of the nature and impact of change upon individuals and communities, providing an assessment of agency for the particular context in which a response is negotiated.

The people of Aleduma’s descent from beings from another planet constitute the origin of the human within an immigrant analogy. Thus, the people’s connection to

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<sup>37</sup> Quilombola: person who lives in a quilombo, a maroon community for escaped slaves and other marginalized peoples in the Brazilian colonial/slavery era.

Earth/land is not naturalized in the same way in which the Christian genesis narrative postulates it, wherein man is literally molded from the clay of the earth and God grants him dominion over all that exists within it. Rather, these “alien” immigrants are required to engage with and adapt to their new environment in a dialectic process, learning and adapting as new situations present themselves. The dispersal engendered by slavery intensifies this process of adaptation because of the hostile and life-threatening conditions of slavery; the process of cultural and social negotiation characteristic of survival strategies in the Americas involved the determination of what aspects of identity could be retained in the process. Less than racialized identities, the spiritual and epistemological values amalgamated from African heritages brought into contact through the slave trade functioned as the basis for a Black diasporic consciousness. Finally, the movement to the Island of Aleduma represents an escape to the quilombo in an act of preservation to ensure social survival and that destinies are fulfilled. This flight from an oppressive society is at once an act of resistance as well as a survival strategy that positions the people of Aleduma in a state of liminality in relation to the Big City.

As discussed previously, one of the master discourses of Brazilian identity focuses on the creation of a “new man” in Brazil characterized by his hybrid status, suggesting an amalgamation of not only races, but cultures. The Big City iconizes the interests of nationalist homogenizing discourse. However, just as this alleged actualization of the melting pot theory fails to nullify the fact of hierarchy among colored/raced subjectivities in Brazil, so the coalescence of Brazilian culture fails to invalidate the specificity of African contributions preserved in the quilombo-like Island of Aleduma. The discourse of hybridity actually highlights the nature of unequal social

relations in Brazilian society and, in this case, it becomes clear that the concept gains social currency in the desire of citizens (realizing the hierarchy among raced bodies) to increasingly define (and acculturate) themselves away from the ultimate ontological Other, the African. This realization is what underscores França's impetus to assert an unequivocal Africanity, even a hybrid Africanity, over Brazilian nationalist constructions of de-Africanized hybridity and to assert *communitas* through the Island of Aleduma.

### **Indigenous History as Mytho-Scientific Genre**

The hybrid African spirituality representative of African-Brazilian identity in the text is demystified by creating a new generic discourse that blends scientific fiction with mythology into an alternative generic form. The creation myth or story is the category of literature that assigns alternative beliefs in the origin of the world and the species of the human to the realm of folklore. Thus, you can find the beliefs of numerous indigenous and primitive "tribes" in books on folklore and folktales recounted as "the attempt of pre-scientific peoples to explain the world about them and its origins," (Patai 27). Over time, the theorization of myth has variously promulgated the ideas of myth as a vehicle for ideology (Fontenrose), and myth as narrative or literature in and of itself (Cohen), both of which suggest the significance of epistemology while doing little to challenge the precepts of myth as a pre-scientific, irrational and primitive discourse. David Bidney expands the analysis of myth a bit beyond this binary by dividing the views of myth into the categories of "the symbolic, followed by idealistic philosophers and theologians, and the literal, followed by ethnologists." The symbolic and the literal references the inability of theorists to reconcile the alleged contradiction in a metaphysical approach and a sociological approach (Patai 16). These variations in the theorization of myth all draw

distinctions on the basis of contemporary versus primitive ways of understanding the world, reifying the idea of a hierarchical evolutionary development, or stages of humanity where the more primitive peoples of the world are the furthest from articulating “the Truth” while modern cultures, with their investment in scientific rationale, more closely approximate “the Truth.”<sup>38</sup> These various postulations of the definition and function of myth/mythology form the basis of the popular conception of the term. However, I understand myth as a constellation of ideological narratives that every culture creates; they need not necessarily be correlated with supernatural beings and symbolic references. The function and significance of myth lies in the social acceptance of this set of ideologies which, whether grounded in religious imagery or scientific reasoning, construct the basis for how members of societies understand their social and spiritual relationships/connectedness and obligations.

França’s text clearly draws on what would be considered mythology from both European and African sources in her reconfiguration of centaurs in the graúnas and the Dogon creation stories. However, *A Mulher de Aleduma* also constitutes a work of science fiction on the basis of its affirmation of genetic evolution as a primary factor in the ideology of the text. But it refuses the binary of religious myth and scientific reasoning as two radically opposite discourses, serving two gods that, upon close examination, are not very different after all. Within the text, the conflation of science through genetic and evolutionary discourse and originary myth of the people of Aleduma in a type of modified “intelligent design” theory articulate the gods as scientists,

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<sup>38</sup> These assertions represent the traditional understanding of the nature and function of myth/ology. There may be counter-trends within the discourse that challenge some of these assumptions, but what I discuss here is how the foundational grounds of the category function, continuing to hold considerable sway in both popular and some academic minds.

resolving the alleged conflict between science and religion and positioning them both as equal factors in the ideological basis forming the culture.

Because mythology continues to carry with it all of the baggage referencing it as a primitive form of rationalism and science fiction's assertions of scientific logic as superior, true, and for the most part, God-free, I prefer to define França's text as indigenous history. This term synthesizes the dichotomies postulated by theoreticians, merging the idea of myth as both a vehicle of ideology and narrative, both symbolic and literal. Further, it shifts the epistemological frame of reference within the label from the mainstream perspective of this information as mere myth or story (read: imaginary, untrue) to the credibility and validity of this information from the indigenous perspective, as their history, wherein religion, along with science, become equally viable narratives within the larger ideological constellation of the society.

*A Mulher de Aleduma* represents the convergence of multiple discourses on the margins of Brazilian letters. As Ginway argues, "contemporary Brazilian science fiction generally remains on the margins of the literary establishment" and "suffers doubly, first because it is associated with 'low art' and popular fiction, and second because it is an imaginative genre in a country which places high value on literary realism" (138, 29). Brazilian women writers argue that they, too, have been ignored by the literary canon. Ferreira-Pinto argues, "Brazilian women writers... [form] a female literary lineage that only in the last quarter of the twentieth century has started to be recovered" (1). Both of these critical texts join the mainstream literary establishment in ignoring the contributions of Black writers. Steven White's assertion bears repeating: "over the decades, there has been an increasingly more open discussion in Brazil of the systematic marginalization of

African-Brazilian writers from Brazilian literary culture, a phenomenon that mirrors the manner by which Brazil's institutionalized racism perpetuates the myth of a 'racial democracy'" (69). Interestingly, all of these critics deal with some aspect of myth in Brazilian culture that serves to articulate each of their particular concerns, particularly through the nationalist ideological myths of Brazil that locate black women outside of the discourse, even while appropriating the black feminine body as a symbol for the nation.

Thus, Aline França's *A Mulher de Aleduma* constitutes a multiply liminal discourse which counters Brazilian nationalist narratives ideological constructions. Instead, she begins with the "least of society," the African-descended Brazilian woman. Black female subjectivity, as the most objectified and degraded social position in Brazil, is liberated and relocated as the source of an ongoing connectedness with a spiritual epistemology in the African Diaspora within Brazil, resisting subjugation and propagating a vision of an improved world for everyone, not just a better Brazil for black women. Further, her African-based ideology moves beyond the concerns of generating national identity to a concern with the place of African-descended women in generating hope for the entire world. Her articulation of a distinctive generic form both symbolically and literally rejects the binaries and ideological assumptions that attempt to place black Brazilian female subjectivity beyond the margins of social and literary discourse, locating it instead at the interstices, the common point of non-reference amongst all three of these marginalized discourses, conferring upon it its liminal status. Her text collapses the boundaries between science and religion, the real and the imaginary, rationality and emotion, Self and Other; in this way, two gods become one in the service of uniting humanity.

### CHAPTER 3

**"THE SPIRIT OF BREAKING THE RULES:"<sup>39</sup>**  
TECHNOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY AND GENRE SUBVERSION IN  
NALO HOPKINSON'S *BROWN GIRL IN THE RING* AND  
ERNA BRODBER'S *LOUISIANA*

*"Sin...is assuming your own position without embarrassment."*

~The character of Ella Townsend Kohl in *Louisiana*

The notion of rupture classically identifies the condition of the African in the New World experience. Fragmentation is traditionally perceived as the annihilating condition that erases history, culture and therefore human subjectivity via the Middle Passage. The Caribbean, however, embraces shift/movement/change—rupture, as it were—as a central and salient feature of identity as fractured elements break apart and reconnect in new ways, readily supporting the operative premises of multiply liminal discourse. "Fractal patterns" and hybridity, when undergirded by embracing African spiritual heritage, form a bedrock for identity that responds to constantly shifting environs, transforming Diasporic spaces.

My analysis of Caribbean women's literature engages their literary and critical production, specifically those that engage Caribbean subjectivity and space, utilizing the trope of exile to characterize the impact of gendered experience in Diasporic spaces beyond the Caribbean "home" space. Caribbean women's speculative fiction offers a perspective on rupture and so-called "dislocatedness" that reconstructs Northern urban

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<sup>39</sup> Quote taken from Nalo Hopkinson's introduction to *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*.



spaces. Erna Brodber and Nalo Hopkinson's texts exhibit how Caribbean women negotiate the relationship between subjectivity, space and spirituality to reveal reinventions of both urban and ancient technologies, subverting the science fiction text. The analysis extends to demonstrate the socially regenerative power located in reclaiming black heritage and re-membered spiritual legacies that allows the characters to exert a transformative influence upon the urban, diasporic communities in which they find themselves.

### **Fractal Patterns: Nationhood, Exile, and Subject Formation in and Beyond the Caribbean**

The study of the Caribbean in this chapter highlights diasporic space as a central feature informing black female subjectivity and spirituality, underscoring the interplay of the elements of multiply liminal discourse that have been the larger concern of this project. In the Caribbean, as with most other regions that have suffered the scourge of slavery, early theorists argued that slaves lost all of their culture, history and heritage during the perils of the Middle Passage, thus creating a blank slate upon which European customs, language and habits were then inscribed, however imperfectly. However, critics such as John Blassingame and Edward Kamau Brathwaite have disputed this claim, indicating the multiple counterhegemonic responses to the imposition of European control. Isidore Okpewho, in paraphrasing Blassingame, states “the slaves held on stubbornly to their ancestral mores not only as a political statement, but as a psychological necessity, and found ways of masking their customs with a superficial veneer of European icons when their owners sought to erase their African memories” (xv). Maureen Warner-Lewis extends this argument, suggesting that “compromise and

syncretism have been inevitable strategies for personal and group survival. Such transformation and readjustment necessarily involved the fracturing of customs and ritual from their African institutional hierarchies of authority and governance” (21-22). She goes on to argue that “the reconstituted elements of African cultures in the West Atlantic are also renegotiating their relationships to non-African ethnic discourses and matrices of power given their complex mutli-ethnic environments...” (24).

This fragmentation so characteristic of Caribbean culture and consciousness “implies that elements of a putative whole may have been erased and lost, but the surviving fragments have been reconstituted into modalities which are peculiar to each diasporic location, modalities which themselves continue to renegotiate their relationship to each other” (Warner-Lewis 24). Migration and displacement play a major role in constituting this fragmentation; the cultural reconfigurations created therein generate a response to “the pressures and innovations produced by immigration, out-migration, and modernization” (24). In a space where migration and displacement are central features of existence, “one’s country of origin—and the place in which one chooses to resettle—can assume tremendous importance,” (Olmos 267) potentially fueling the drive towards nationalistic identifications rather than regional ones. Despite the nationalist impulse, however, Patricia Saunders suggests that “the idea of a nation, imagined or otherwise, is not only difficult to sustain but may be quite perplexing if one considers the rapidity of migration and exchange (of people, discourses, currency, cultures) throughout the Caribbean” (136). Additionally, nationalist discourse becomes increasingly problematic if, as Saunders suggests, “the nation signifies male struggle, authority and sovereignty. This is so despite the continued narrative representations of the nation as overtly

gendered (female) and specifically sexualized through the mapping of nationalist agendas on women's bodies" (Saunders 134). Rather than reinscribe the notion of the nation as a sovereign masculine whole constituted as distinct and separate from other islands/countries in the region, I want to propose the examination of Caribbean nationhood as a continuously shifting diasporic space in and beyond the Caribbean characterized by the constellation of modalities (a piecing together of particular fragments, if you will) that at once acknowledges the socio-historical situation of Jamaica in a dialectical relationship to the larger Caribbean and the wider African Diaspora.

These modalities are located in the traveling discursive iterations of subjectivity, space, and spirituality. The inter-related questions of identity/subjectivity, geographic space and socio-cultural locatedness, and African-based spirituality illuminate the dynamics of these interlockings through the centrality of movement, shift and change invoked by Diaspora in the Caribbean context. Within the diasporic space of the Caribbean, the hybrid nature of Caribbean culture and expression is a central feature inflecting Caribbean subjectivities while illuminating the specificity of African-based spiritual traditions. As Olmos and Gebert assert, "an important dimension of Caribbean consciousness has been forged by African-based culture, and it has generated a degree of unity not found in other regional constellations" (10). In Jamaica in particular, the black population constitutes a majority status, but subjective identities continue to be constituted partially through the subtle legacy of colonial policies and practices that continue to affect social and political relationships and arrangements. Much of Jamaican author Michelle Cliff's work focuses on color and caste in Jamaican culture, interrogating the colonial legacy of class and color stratifications that keep dark-skinned Jamaicans

socially and economically depressed. She says: "When did *we* (the light-skinned middle class Jamaicans) take over for *them* as oppressors? I need to see when and how this happened" ("If I Could Write This in Fire," 359). Thus, in spite of Barbara Lalla's observation that "Jamaican literature is distinguished from the black writing model in that it is less race-centered, less hinged to a philosophy of *négritude*," (94) much of the peculiarly Jamaican sensibility manifested in the literature represents "alter/native modes of being [that] include sociohistorical consciousness that emerges from non-traditional systems of knowledge production, psychic experiences, and cultural and epistemological translations..." (136). These "non-traditional systems of knowledge production" and "epistemological translations" are traceable to the cultural roots of Africa (Billson 140). Thus, while association with a philosophy of *négritude* or a "black writing model" may not be articulated as such, the permutations of African epistemological inheritance throughout much of Jamaican literature qualify it as "black literature." The following sections will deal, respectively, with women's subjective identities in Jamaica and the Jamaican Diaspora, the role of travel, space, and claiming 'home,' and African-based spirituality as a grounding feature in the configuration of black female subjectivity in Jamaican literature.

### **Women and Jamaican Literature: From Object to Subject**

In her essay "Women in Jamaican Literature 1900-1950," Rhonda Cobham maps the representation of women in Jamaican literature, drawing parallels with the historical evolution of women's culture in the country, starting with attitudes developed during slavery. Citing the ways in which the condition of slavery affected familial patterns, she argues that women worked as hard as men and were punished as severely, stable sexual

unions were discouraged, and female slaves were encouraged not to have children.<sup>40</sup> “These attitudes to family life,” Cobham argues, “were sometimes internalized by slave women” (196). As a result, these perspectives carried over into emancipation, with socio-historical circumstances such as the migration of men to other countries and islands for work contributing to the continued financial and sexual independence of Jamaican women. “By the twentieth century,” Cobham suggests, “a well-established female lifestyle had emerged among the second generation of free black women.” She cites Erna Brodber’s analysis of these distinctive female traits as “‘emotional accommodation’ (the ability to adjust without trauma to changing domestic units and/or relationships), independence, and authority” (Cobham 196).

Thus, this distinctive female lifestyle became a source of examination for many writers, as the stereotype of the unusually industrious yet sexually promiscuous lower-class Jamaican woman challenged the Victorian values so revered in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jamaica. Jamaican women represented a contradiction in terms, for if chastity was primary among Victorian values, a value which appeared lacking given the constantly shifting familial and conjugal relationships, hard work and industriousness, which was certainly characteristic of these women, only ranked second; thus, the Jamaican lower-class woman character became a site to examine these seeming contradictions. Nearly all Jamaican fiction prior to 1920, Cobham argues, “is taken up with trying to resolve this contradiction in a way that would rationalize the position of women in Jamaican society in terms acceptable to the dominant culture” (197).

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<sup>40</sup> Historical analysis suggests it was considered cheaper to import full-grown slaves rather than incur the cost of raising a slave child until it was of working age, one of the distinguishing elements of slavery in the Caribbean when compared to slavery in the United States and Brazil. (Cobham 197).

What renders Jamaican literary history distinctive is that, between 1900 and 1950, one can map the “close documentation of every step in the changing perception of the West Indian woman by its writers” (Cobham 219). Cobham further identifies “a basic pattern of male protagonists taking over from female figures in the literature published after 1950, suggesting that “the ‘typical’ West Indian novel, with its middle-class male protagonist and its theme of cultural alienation is in fact a comparatively recent phenomenon” (220). Thus, the current manifestation of female subjects and themes in contemporary West Indian and Jamaican writing reflects a *re*assertion of engagement with women in literature rather than an entirely new phenomenon (Cobham 220).

There is a distinction, however between the representation of black female characters by others and a self-representation by black women in their own voices from their own perspectives, an occurrence that seems to have emerged with the increased migration of Caribbean women to the United States, Canada, and Britain. Saunders suggests “the increase in production, circulation, and dissemination of women’s writing in the Caribbean diaspora is a concerted response to an epistemological crisis in our understanding of difference and identity” (140). In the Jamaican context, Cobham maps an engagement with the black Jamaican woman as subject that later becomes subsumed to the nationalistic paradigms and exile narratives operating amongst the male Caribbean authorship, particularly those in exile during the 40s and 50s (Saunders 139). Saunders extends the critical conversation, asserting that “one of the important distinctions... made between Caribbean women's writing and that of their male counterparts is their varying perspectives on the experience and implications of colonialism” (135). She juxtaposes the earlier predominantly masculine writing of Caribbean immigrant writers of the 40s and

50s with the later writing of Caribbean women, observing that “the migration of women writers in the 1980s and 1990s was not hailed with the same sense of national pride as the previous exodus of the ‘sons of the nation’” (140). She argues, “Historically, Caribbean literature written by women has been marginalized both because of social, cultural, and economical inequities based on gender and, more specifically, because its discourses have not been counted among the institutionalized modes of knowing” (Saunders 139). If Caribbean women writers, understood in the contemporary context to also function within the class of postcolonial women writers, “explore the personal dimensions of history rather than overt concerns with political leadership and nation-states as in the work of their male counterparts,” (Katrak 234) then Saunders is right to “examine the extent to which the ‘emergence’ of Caribbean women’s literature is intimately connected to the epistemological and ontological exigencies which necessarily attend changes in (inter)national identities and spaces” (141).

To particularize these general claims that identify a distinctive Caribbean women’s literature, Barbara Lalla focuses on Jamaican literary practices, suggesting that “the driving force of [Jamaican] fiction appears to be a commitment to truth—a claim that may seem less trite if the pursuit of truth is linked to shifts of perspective”(14), shifts already alluded to by Katrak and Saunders. These assertions point towards the possibility of a distinctively female Jamaican literature, i.e. a distinctive female culture and perspective that has been marginalized at specific points in history and which ultimately reappears in the works of contemporary Jamaican women writers.

## **Caribbean Women Writers and Speculative Fiction**

The work of Caribbean women writers and scholars in recent years emerges in defiance of "the reality of absence, of voicelessness, of marginalization," giving rise to "the necessity to find a form, a mode of expression" (Davies & Fido 4). One emergent mode of expression is located in speculative fiction, a literary model that gains a peculiar force through the "marriage of two traditions of writing that have different priorities and protocols," one that requires rationally/scientifically verifiable proof of phenomena and the other which tends to accept the irrational and inexplicable alongside mundane realities (Hopkinson xii-xiii). This presents a challenge, even as it is acknowledged that "narrative types in Jamaican discourse blur as writers embed, one with the other, quite dissimilar types of texts... In its textual structure, as in other dimensions, the discourse is a hybrid" (12). Certainly, as "pro-Western ideologues of 'progress' and 'civilization' have derided ritualistic practices of African origin as proof of the Caribbean folks' inability to embrace 'modernity,'" (Olmos-Gebert 37) those same proponents have been unable to perceive the ways in which African-based folk experiences already infuse not only modern and contemporary discourses, but also futuristic paradigms upon which the idea of "progress" predicated itself. In this context, Patricia Saunders's political theory of metaphysics, in "creating another epistemic foundation for understanding being in a postmodern society" (141) engages the task of "redefining what constitutes the real (world) and what we define as political in this context" (151). Thus, loving black spiritual heritage, particularly in African-based ritualistic practices and especially for Caribbean folk who have migrated to Northern/urban contexts, becomes a radical and politicized act of resistance for the characters who continue to perform the practices within the texts to



be discussed later in this chapter. Caribbean women's speculative fiction fuses the scientific/rationalistic grounds of the northern literary tradition of science fiction with African spiritual epistemological foundations of Caribbean culture.

As is the case with each of these regions examined within this text, there is a paucity of literature written in the speculative and science fiction genres by women of African descent in the Caribbean and its Diaspora. This may be due in part to the lack of perception on the part of critics to recognize the literature as such. However, the efforts of author Nalo Hopkinson highlight a distinctive Caribbean sensibility within the genre. In 2001, Hopkinson edited the first anthology of Caribbean "fabulist fiction" in the speculative tradition. Titled *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, Hopkinson reveals her attempt to "reveal that hybrid place where magical realism... genre science fiction and fantasy co-exist" (Nelson 105). Prior to and in tandem with Hopkinson's effort, some certain Afro-Caribbean women's texts not previously recognized or characterized as science fiction actually challenge typical representations and uses of technology that generate alternatively conceived historical and futuristic paradigms and/or technologies that actually incorporate the seemingly binary contradictions between Eurocentric and indigeno-centric epistemologies, i.e. science fiction and so-called magical realism. One of the roles of science fiction and fantasy as she defines it is to "interrogate the tools which humanity puts in place to manipulate its reality, whether those tools are simple or advanced technologies, or social systems such as laws and religions" (Hopkinson 109). For example, the character of Ida in Marcia Douglas's *Madam Fate* utilizes the calabash as a medium to communicate with the spirit world while Erna Brodber's character of Ella in *Louisiana* utilizes the first-of-its-kind recording machine to verify her

communication/interview of the deceased and to ultimately trouble some presumptions about social scientific methodology which does not allow or account for certain presumably "extraordinary" experiences in the world of the "native." Nalo Hopkinson conceptualizes an entire futuristic cyber network based on Jamaican spiritual entities in *Midnight Robber*; and the dreadlocks of the black inhabitants of the underground maroon colony in Opal Palmer Adisa's "The Living Roots" inflect the icon of the cyborg, as the dead matter of hair is infused with critical life-sustaining force permitting them to breathe in subterranean layers. Each of these texts pushes the boundaries of speculative fiction.

Caribbean and postcolonial speculative fiction offers alternative perceptions and visions of technologies and their place within culture, challenging the notion of these cultures as pre-technological and non-progressive, and thus, bereft of visions of the future. As Uppinder Meehan suggests in the epilogue to *So Long Been Dreaming*, an anthology of postcolonial science fiction and fantasy co-edited with Nalo Hopkinson, "one of the key strategies employed by these writers is to radically shift the perspective of the narrator from the supposed rightful heir of contemporary technologically advanced cultures to those of us whose cultures have had their technology destroyed and stunted" (270). ). Much of Caribbean women's work resists this representation of a destroyed and stunted technology, re-casting and reclaiming the image and idea of technology according to a Caribbean episteme, thereby subverting the traditional generic schema of science fiction.

The forms of literary expression examined in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* and Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* reflect the constantly shifting dynamics of Jamaican women's diasporic consciousness and subjective identities, revealing the centrality of

African spirituality as a grounding feature particularly in the modern, postmodern, and technological, "progressive," futuristic paradigms found within the New World context. Their scientific literary modes bridge the cognitive gap between "literature cultures" (i.e., so-called "developed/first world" cultures) and "folklore cultures" (or so-called "developing/third world" cultures). As Owomoyela points out, "folklore societies (or cultures) are presumed to be exempt from the dynamic processes of history, and to be committed to the stability of their institutions and practices; they are thought to be afraid of change, and, consequently, to be reluctant to acknowledge the existence of a future, or to plan for it" (275-76). Conversely, "literature cultures... are deemed to be comfortable with the knowledge that everything changes, that they are in a constant state of becoming and, therefore that they must always actively seek to understand the current state of things, and be prepared to face new challenges in the future" (Owomoyela 276).

Hopkinson and Brodber's texts illuminate the always already central position of shift/movement/change in the Jamaican and Jamaican Diasporic perspective and experience, and the equally central feature of spirituality as an aspect of identity in the futuristic and alternative historical narratives generated by each author. If, as Owomoyela asserts, "the appeal of westernization (literature) derives from its association with the state of technological development the world has achieved, development made possible by science," (277) then the added appeal of the Caribbean texts examined in this chapter is the assertion of "third world" or postcolonial epistemologies challenging and framing anew contemporary conceptions of the utilization of science and technology towards futuristic paradigms in the form of speculative fiction. The conjunctive examination of the works of Nalo Hopkinson and Erna Brodber offers a reading of Caribbean literature

that engages both the particularity of a specific Caribbean culture, Jamaica, (Brodber's text) and the idea of Caribbean literature in its expansiveness as it operates in the Diaspora (Hopkinson's text). Both share a sense of connectivity to the broader social and historical processes shaping black people's experiences. They illuminate the complexities of Caribbean cultural identity and the centrality of hybrid consciousness and diasporic sensitivities in the Caribbean subject formation, offering a sense of the complex and central importance of hybridity and cultural dynamism in the forging of subjective identities, movement and migration in the re/discovery of "home" places and spaces, and the resilience of African-based spiritualities enabled through a loving embrace of that heritage not despite, but because of, these constant shifts and changes. While analysis of Hopkinson's text exhibits breadth of subversive engagement with space, subjectivity, spirituality, and numerous science fiction icons and elements, Brodber's text reveals depth in the examination of the relationship of scientific meta-discourse to the particular role of technology when reconstituted through African Caribbean spiritual experiences.

### **Diasporic Space and the (Dis)Pleasures of Exile: A Feminist Perspective**

*Brown Girl* and *Louisiana* illuminate the challenges of Caribbean immigrants and their descendents living in Northern/Western countries to create culture-affirming spaces that permit cultural heritage to survive alongside the negating conditions of a technological society. The places that immigrants occupy become liminal spaces, providing the opportunity to assert "a recuperated and rearticulated identity that is both individual and communal, here and there, of self and of other, in ways which reaffirm the roots of origin while the self always remains cognizant of the fissuring, the inability to return to the homeland" (Chancy 5-6).

The condition of exile frequently associated with the migration (forced or voluntary) of Caribbean peoples to northern locales bears a direct corollary to the notion of liminality, especially considering the social negotiations required for survival in a foreign environment. As Paola Boi asserts, “for the migrant, the adjustments to such new environments as those found in the urban realities of the U.S. Northern cities, the founding of a new home can coincide with the development of several strategies of resistance and survival” (184). Diasporic relocations engender liminal spaces wherein the condition of exile acts as the medium for both a heightened awareness of oppressed status and a more articulate voice with which to express dissent and enact resistance. Studies have revealed the racism and resistance that Caribbean immigrants endure upon migration to such areas as Canada, the U.S. and Britain (Billson, Chancy, Henry, Levine). Additionally, critics such as Patricia Saunders and Myriam Chancy have challenged the traditionally masculine representation of emigrant experience, of the so-called “pleasures of exile” as articulated by critics such as George Lamming and Edward Said, as neglectful of “the realities of women of African descent” (Chancy 23). Saunders asserts that “the ‘pleasure of exile’ was not one shared by many women (writers or otherwise)” at the historical juncture of the 1940’s and ‘50’s when so many male writers took up residence in Britain and the U.S. (140). Chancy further asserts that “if we have come to know the condition of exile through literature, we have come to know it primarily through a male prism” (3), a position which places further distance from women’s experiences of exile in the masculine assumption of unrecognized privilege, that is, the “nostalgic incarnation of a poet-figure, an idealized insurgent” (Chancy 3) whose position “carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality” (Said 362). For Afro-

Caribbean women, however, this romanticized vision of the exile's condition is untenable; Chancy calls for an understanding of exile that takes into account those women whose lives are "a constant balancing act between more than two conflicting codes" (Chancy 4).

Women's experiences of exile are chartered through the "sea of necessity" in "a process of forced migration" that "foregrounds what it means to be dispossessed of one's homeland in every facet of one's identity and to have had little or no choice in one's state of exile" (4). Chancy suggests that "class becomes an all-important dimension of the ways in which [women] are multiply disadvantaged," a distinction which inscribes itself on the bodies of women, forming "the very nexus of the battle that begins at home and carries into exile" (4-5). "It is in exile," Chancy asserts,

that such awareness of the limitations imposed upon the body becomes much clearer; for "out there," women have the opportunity to speak out against their marginalization in a culture which is not theirs... Women can ironically politicize discourse and be heard in more than one culture simultaneously. (5)

Thus, the complexities and paradoxes of exile for Caribbean women negotiate the "balancing act" of gaining insight into their own dispossession and negation of identity in a world that defines itself as male and the opportunity to assert counter-hegemonic responses to the interlocking oppressions of race, sex, class and sexuality manifesting both at home and in exile. Women feminize this "spirituality of exiles" not through the invocation of "nostalgia for the home country, but in the form of a centering in the self, in the Black female body recovered through women's language, relationships to one another, and through women's writing and words" (Chancy 5). These re-articulations of the (dis)pleasures of exile through a feminist lens, then, constitutes a method for learning

to claim black female spiritual heritage and presents itself as a curative domain engendered through the literary practices and interpretive strategies of black Caribbean women writers and critics. Given these exigencies, I want to read the characters of Ti-Jeanne and Ella as operating within a condition of exile, generations removed from the home space yet continuing to embody the balancing act between negated identities and counter-hegemonic resistance through loving African spiritual heritage.

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, the creation of immigrant communities can be read as a reverse colonization of sorts, whereby former colonials stake claim to the spaces and resources of the metropole, abandoning their home spaces leached of vitality due to imperial practices and reconstituting much of their culture in the former colonizer's "home" space. This process reflects an opportunity for resistance to the oppressed position relegated to those communities, yet continues to highlight the power differentials that limit their social and economic advancement as "postcolonial" subjects. Thus, immigrant relocations become liminal spaces. In *Brown Girl*, this is exhibited through the transformation (reconfiguration) of urban spaces in the re-construction of the inner city as "the Burn," and the occupation of the CN Tower as Rudy's druglord headquarters.

Ti-Jeanne and her grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, live in "the Burn," what would be regarded by the implicitly white suburbanites that have abandoned the city center of Toronto as a vast urban wasteland. The suburbanites have packed up their technology, their government, and their resources and fled to the outer suburbs, erecting gates and guards to keep the impoverished citizens from infiltrating their pristine communities, creating a "doughnut hole." Those who have fled seem to anticipate an imminent collapse of the inner-city. Mr. Reed, the self-appointed librarian in the Burn,

develops a display that chronicles the events leading to the decimation of Toronto's core, outlining a chain of causality. The old newspaper headline clippings begin with the land claim lawsuit of indigenous Indian communities and the subsequent international trade embargos that drain resources from the city, resulting in high jobless rates and the presumably attendant increases in crime. The decline continues with the collapse of the rapid transit system due to lack of repairs, which sparks protest by the residents that then escalate into the Riots. By the time the army is called in, the largest employers have already relocated to the suburbs along with the city hall, the police have walked out, and the newspapers have disbanded (11). Thus, Canada's refusal to share land wealth with its native populations results in a social and economic depression that locates its most profound effects among the poorer sectors of society, those living in the inner city. In actuality, however, the presumed collapse of the inner city gives way to a reconfiguration of urban space into a kind of (pastoral), pluralistic colony. Citizens from various multicultural backgrounds return to a simple yet resourceful system of barter and exchange which generates a sense of community and facilitates survival.

The allegedly marginalized, left to struggle for survival inside the Burn, become literally and figuratively centered in Hopkinson's structuring of the text. At the same time, however, the same hegemonic ideologies that generated the conditions that produced the Burn continue to operate from their seemingly displaced locales on the suburban periphery to continue to disrupt the lives of the inhabitants of the Burn. Premier Uttley, in an attempt to save her own life and win the next election, calls for the reinstatement of the archaic practice of using human donors for organ replacement surgeries. She and her cronies employ Rudy, the *obeah*-working drug lord who appoints



himself overseer of the inhabitants in the Burn, to "procure" a human heart donor in return for a handsome fee. The collusion between Rudy and the Premier's henchmen corresponds to the colonial legacy of "indigenous" elites' post-emancipation clamor for power, taking over the position of the oppressor to advance selfish ends. Driving his Bentley around the Burn, Rudy displays his power and wealth garnered through his reckless use of *obeah*, or witchcraft, to maintain control of the traffic in drugs and to protect himself from usurpers. His role as a corrupt indigenous "leader" is further apparent in his bold occupation of the CN Tower as his personal office. As the tallest building in the world, the CN Tower is something of a modern-day Tower of Babylon. Rudy's economically motivated, power hungry maneuverings and use of obeah to "make the spirits serve him" signal the wholesale belief in personal material gain through his attempt to establish himself as a god.

The boundaries between the suburbs and the Burn, then, are actually porous; the elite suburbanites, however surreptitiously, continue to penetrate the city core to serve their own perverse agendas, as represented in Premier Uttley's organ donor request and in the continued funding of the liminal space known as "the Strip." The Strip, a red light district fueled by "outcity" money, marks the dividing line between the east and west sides of the Burn. The suburbanites fly in by helicopter to experience the sexual decadences that are always readily available in impoverished areas,<sup>41</sup> landing on the rooftops and taking staircases down into the buildings, able to partake of their pleasures without ever stepping foot on the dangerous city streets (176-177).

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<sup>41</sup> See "Sun, Sex and Gold" for sex trade in third world countries and how this constitutes a similar function.

The ease with which the wealthy suburbanites maneuver in and out of the boundaries of the Burn, then, demonstrates the reinscription of unequal power relations between the Suburban spaces and that of the Burn. Surrounded on all sides by suburbs, the Burn residents are trapped on the inside, refused the possibility of expansion and resigned to the presumably inevitable implosion of the core. Its position at the center of former Toronto's night life remains liminal, rather than marginal, however, in that the revitalization of cultural practices previously hidden when Western powers dominated the space are now allowed to flourish in the open. This provides the opportunity for residents to reconstitute uses of Western constructs for their own ends as rearticulated through their own cultural lenses and practices, resulting in the possibility of reverse penetration by Ti-Jeanne into the presumably impenetrable hegemonic spaces of the Suburbs and the CN Tower. This counter-penetration of hegemonic spaces constitutes the subversive power of traditional Caribbean cultural practices transmuted in the Northern context, revealing the power of this epistemology to manipulate liminal spaces as well.

Ti-Jeanne utilizes the traditional religious technologies invoked by her grandmother to generate a liminal space whereby Tony, her ex-lover, will be able to enter the Suburbs without detection. Tony is compelled to work for Rudy as one of his drug-dealers after being fired from his job as a medical assistant at the hospital because of his addiction to the drug, Buff. Already a reluctant member of Rudy's "posse," he implores Mami Gros-Jeanne's spiritual assistance to escape the Burn. Unbeknownst to Gros-Jeanne, however, he is also attempting to escape the deplorable task of finding and killing a donor that matches Premier Uttley's blood type. Despite his previous derision of Mami

Gros-Jeanne's practices, he is desperate enough to attempt the escape using her spiritual technologies.

Although Mami is reluctant to help him, she agrees to do so at the request of Ti-Jeanne. Invoking the spirits in a myalist ceremony, Mami calls down Prince of Cemetery, who rides Ti-Jeanne and agrees to help by generating a tool that will hide them in a liminal space halfway in Guinea Land, the land of the dead, and halfway in the land of the living. Guinea Land is a parallel dimension of space that ultimately renders the rules of the material world mutable. By holding the gift of a rose that Tony gave her, Ti-Jeanne is able to cloak both she and Tony in the fog of the cemetery; no one in the land of the living can see her as long as she is carrying his gift and no one can see Tony as long as she is accompanying him. But Rudy also utilizes the liminal space of quasi-death to exert power and control over the Burn through the use of the duppy<sup>42</sup> trapped in his duppy bowl. He is able to see into Guinea Land and is able to discern Tony's whereabouts and actions, so he knows that Tony is trying to flee to the suburbs. Thus, Ti-Jeanne and Rudy's engagement in battle is entirely acted out in a space of liminality to which only those initiated into the Afro-Caribbean spiritual belief system are privy.

Rudy sends his henchmen to intercept them, and in spite of the fact that his henchmen can not see them, they still employ, under Rudy's direction, the tool of the synapse cordon which generates an electromagnetic field shock that causes Ti-Jeanne to drop the flower, thereby causing the technology to fail. The failure of technology is one of the mainstays of the science fiction "great adventure story." The technology must fail

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<sup>42</sup> A duppy is the spirit of a dead person whose soul has not transitioned to Guinea Land, the spirit world, and remains tied to the physical world for whatever reason. In this case, Rudy has trapped the spirit in order to make it serve him and to increase his own life force.

so that the protagonist is impelled forward into heroic action; once Tony is captured, he is compelled to do the work Rudy set out for him; he has found his donor, which turns out to be Mami-Gros Jeanne. He returns to kill her so that Rudy can get his reward for finding a heart for Premier Uttley. Tony had hidden the full details of why he was trying to escape the Burn from Ti-Jeanne and Mami Gros-Jeanne, so when he returns and kills Mami and her body is taken away, Ti-Jeanne finally realizes what Tony has done and understands the messages that were given from Papa Osain in the Myalist ceremony: "Tell Gros-Jeanne is past time for she to do my work. Is too late for she and for the middle one, but maybe the end one go win through. Ti-Jeanne, she have to help you get Rudy dead bowl and burn it. Is the only way to stop he from catching spirits in it" (181d).

Rudy has taken over Canada's CN Tower for his personal headquarters, and it is there that Ti-Jeanne must go to engage in the battle that will ultimately bring peace to the Burn. Compelled to act because of the murder of her grandmother and the newly gained information that it is the spirit of her missing mother, Mi-Jeanne (whose body is known on the streets as Crazy Betty) that Rudy has trapped in his duppy bowl in forced servitude, Ti-Jeanne obeys the spirits in playing her part to end Rudy's terrorization of the community. Invoking the spirits in a make-shift ceremony, she heads to the CN Tower to destroy Rudy's duppy bowl.

The CN Tower is symbolically and literally significant in the text; as the tallest building in the world, it symbolically establishes Rudy's authority over all of Toronto from its heightened position. However, Ti-Jeanne re-frames the tower from her spiritual episteme as a center pole such that the CN Tower, literally the centralized manager of Canada's railway transport system, becomes a tool for another kind of transport, the

crossroads between the spiritual and physical/material worlds as it functions as the center pole in myalist ceremony. Realizing that the CN Tower could function as the greatest of all center poles, she calls down the spirits from the heavens and the spirits of all the dead up from the earth that Rudy had killed (221). It extends high into the heavens to call down all the orishas and reaches deep into the roots of the earth to summon up the spirits of all of Rudy's murder victims to exact punishment for his spiritual crime of soul thievery and murder. Spiritual life, material life, and technological life converge in the moment that Ti-Jeanne calls down the orishas and summons up the spirits, creating a dynamic moment of hybrid integration. This manipulation and reconfiguration of time, space, and energy reflects the conflation of Caribbean and Northern notions of space in a diasporic sensibility that centers Caribbean influences upon the Northern context, generating a futuristic community that includes Caribbean epistemological influences.

If the character of Ti-Jeanne transforms the condition of exile to integrate an affirmed spiritual and social identity through a reconstitution of diasporic space, then the character of Ella reveals the ways in which self-imposed exile operates to reconstitute a home space that is psychically and physically embodied, i.e. an epistemological and ontological convergence of literal and discursive space that rejects and resists the hegemonic structures that would negate her identity as a seer woman. Ella operates in a state of exile from her parents and the larger western/academic community—the social/cultural relationships that constitute the discursive space of “home”—once she decides to go to New Orleans to pursue training by Madam Marie. By mainstream standards, she is leaving a position of relative privilege, social respectability and upward mobility to revert to the primitive folkways her parents thought that they had left in

Jamaica. Once she enters Louisiana and acts on her desire to understand and embrace her Caribbean roots despite what her parents think, “home” takes on, as Boi suggests, “a contested place, ‘a locus for misrecognition and alienation’ but also, as Aime Cesaire shows, the ideal locus of reunion and attainment” (184). Thus, in the rejection of the idea of home provided through and by her parents, Ella is rendered unrecognizable, as demonstrated in the exchange with her parents’ lawyer cited previously, and is alienated from those within mainstream U.S. society who perceive her choices and behavior to be at odds with normalcy. Home is attained in the severance from this distorted image of and attitude towards her Caribbean culture, and reconstituted through connecting with the part of U.S. culture that validates her heritage through establishing and celebrating commonalities between southern Louisiana voodoo culture and Caribbean Afro-spiritual cultures. Thus, the condition of exile simultaneously becomes the catalyst for the return home located within the Self.

It is in this way that Diaspora takes on both literal and figurative dimensions, for Ella integrates the common ties that bind African-descended people in the Americas, locating these commonalities historically with the story of Mammy Sue Ann and contemporarily through her interactions with the seamen who constitute Madam Marie’s clientele. In becoming the medium for Lowly, Mammy’s long dead friend and by claiming her Jamaican heritage through joining the New Orleans community and tutelage of Madame Marie, Ella psychically enables the embodiment of the literal spaces of Louisiana, USA and Louisiana, St. Mary of Jamaica. Additionally, by becoming the medium for both Lowly (from Jamaica) and Mammy Sue Ann (from Louisiana) after her death, she collapses the previously distinct iterations of space, time and personage in the

figure of Ella Townsend Kohl, also known, after the integration of these things, as Louisiana.

Ella discovers that she has become a medium for a third party upon reviewing the recording of the interview with Mammy Sue Ann. The voice of the third person, being channeled through Ella, is Mammy's old friend, Lowly, who Mammy met when she moved to Chicago. Lowly and Mammy become friends, discovering commonalities in their family heritages despite Lowly being of Jamaican descent and Mammy being from the U.S. Mammy recalls one of their first conversations about where each of them are from:

“You not from Louisiana, Miss Anna?”... (Lowly)

“Sure right I am babe and mighty proud of it... From St. Mary's parish, Louisiana. Yes Mam... You ain't the only soul got a place called 'St. Mary, Louisiana.' ... The big master name me Grant.” (Anna)

“Miss Anna, you are my family. My mother was a Grant. Her grandfather a Grant. All Grants are my cousins. They are all born and grow where I come from.” (Lowly) (15-16).

In recalling the connection between her and her old friend Lowly, Mammy is reminded of and recognizes something of both herself and lowly in the character of Ella. As Ella makes her daily visits to record Mammy Sue Ann's story, she is unaware of the ruminations in Mammy's head, of the spark of recognition that will bring together Anna's history, Lowly's history, and their history of political activism together in the personage of Ella. Mammy is in conversation with her dead friend Lowly; and both she and Lowly choose to share their story with Ella because of her hybrid status: “Who is this gal with some bits of me and some bits of you?” And Lowly's response:

“Two places can make children! Two women sire another?... Could be your chariot. Hold tight Suzie Anna.”

“This be the kid?”  
“This is the horse. Will you ride?”  
“Will she do?”  
“Best I have seen. Will you ride?”  
“Let’s see if she will.” (17)

Because of her status as a political activist, Mammy Sue Ann has been selected by the government for her story to be gathered as a part of the history of the Negro of Southwest Louisiana. Ella was asked to conduct the interview because it was assumed that, because of her race, she would be able to “get her to talk.” But in the conversation above, it is revealed that Ella is provided access to Mammy’s story because Mammy and Lowly themselves have chosen her to be their medium. With Lowly long dead, Mammy has been waiting to die—waiting until the proper person comes so that she will be able to pass on their story. And Mammy and Lowly’s criteria are fundamentally different from that of the government: they need someone who embodies both the Caribbean and black American sensibilities, who can bring together in totality the common ties that bind Suzie Anna and Lowly, the U.S. and Jamaica, together. Mixing the black southern American metaphor of “riding the chariot in the morning” associated with the transition of death to the afterlife and the African spiritual practice of spirits “riding” their medium, Lowly and Suzie Anna choose Ella to complete the circle of knowledge. So after the first recorded interview, after Ella’s ability to serve as a medium is verified, Mammy dies.

Of course, Ella is unaware of this internal dialogue that Mammy has been having with Lowly; she is initially unaware that she is participating as a medium, and that she has been selected by Mammy to receive her soul upon her death. And she is not aware of this information sooner because she neglects to review the tape after their interview because of the impending arrival of her lover, Reuben. Immediately thereafter, Mammy



dies, and she attends the funeral where she experiences the “transfer of souls” that the community witnesses. It is not until after these events have transpired and she is making preparations to return to the North that she listens to the recording and is shocked to discover a third voice on the recording where she had originally thought there was only silence.

When Ella finally comes to terms with what is recorded on the tape and decides to move forward with the transcriptions, she begins the process of understanding the connections between Mammy and Lowly:

I let go and was all ears. I listened. I heard the song of the first lady. I backtracked and backtracked until the words were clear... whate’er the melody the tune and the lyrics were unmistakably familiar. That last time I had heard them I had collapsed... *Upon the hill, the rising sun. It is the voice that calls me home.* They had sung that at Mammy’s funeral. And according to this lady it was sung at her funeral which had taken place somewhere else...

This lady was indeed describing a funeral, the larger version of which I had experienced. What she described was the small photo; Mammy’s funeral was the enlargement of the self-same photo...

Two different women. Two different places. Two different times. Buried in similar rites. (51)

It is not until much later, after she has fully submitted to her transformation and role as seer woman, that she fully understands her role in serving as Mammy and Lowly’s medium. She describes the way for understanding her metamorphosis, the integration of Mammy, Lowly, and herself, thusly:

Put the tips of your index fingers and the tips of your thumbs together. Your extremities now form a diamond. Imagine the diamond to be solid, three-dimensional. Now pierce a hole through the centre of this. That hole, that passage is me. I am the link between the shores washed by the Caribbean sea, a hole, yet I am what joins your left hand to your right. I join the world of the living and the world of the spirits. I join the past with the present. In me Louise and Sue Ann are joined. Say Suzie Anna as Louise calls Mammy. Do you hear Louisiana there? Now say Lowly as

Mammy calls Louise and follow that with Anna as Louise sometimes calls Mammy. Lowly-Anna. There's Louisiana again, particularly if you are lisp-tongued as you could well be. Or you could be Spanish and speak of those two venerable sisters as Louise y Anna. I was called in Louisiana, a state in the USA. Sue Ann lived in St. Mary, Louisiana, and Louise in St. Mary, Louisiana, Jamaica... I am Louisiana. (124-125).

In the journey towards self-recognition and –actualization, towards the full integration of her subjective identity as a seer-woman and spirit medium whose purpose is the reunification of African-descended peoples in a practice of self-recognition and of the recognition of the self in others, she integrates time (history) and space (Jamaica and the Black U.S./Louisiana) through spiritual mediumship, contained in the transformed identity of herself as Louisiana.

Ella/Louisiana's ability to bring these elements together within herself marks her as an able practitioner to also bring these common elements together within the community. Unlike her predecessor, Madam Marie, who enjoys arguing about the origins of the songs that the seamen who visit her all seem to know and share, despite the scattering of origins and home places they represent from the diaspora, Ella does not “engage [her] clients in arguments about the origins of their relationships with the songs they sing.” She states: “No need for argument. The songs are equally ours now. We just sing. I made no statement on this. It is the shape of things. My clients, though they are as many natives as West Indians, don't argue among themselves about origins either” (129).

The common chord of African peoples and practices across the Caribbean and the U.S. is identified and shared through song, homegoing rites and practices, and belief in the spiritual power of mediumship and soul transfer. Integration of supposedly disparate heritages renders an increased sense of community possible via the leadership of

Louisiana, who has rendered the integration of literal and discursive space at home within herself first. The return home to self, ironically enabled through exile, engenders a building of community between West Indian and American blacks who so frequently understand their relationship in terms of difference rather than similarity. In the case of both Ti-Jeanne and Ella, each character must “come home” to herself as a spiritual and community leader to not only embrace, but integrate the varying aspects of their subjective identities.

**Embracing Spiritual Subjectivities and African Heritage:  
Ti-Jeanne and Ella as Two-Headed Women in Hostile Territory**

Ti-Jeanne has been critiqued primarily for her characterization as an unlikely superhero in the science fiction tradition because of her status as a breastfeeding mother (Michlitsch). However, the primary dimension which must be foregrounded is Ti-Jeanne’s inheritance as a healer and root-worker through her matrilineal heritage, falling within the literary and historical legacy of what Valerie Lee identifies as “sistah conjurers” and “granny midwives.” The character of Ti-Jeanne adds a generational and diasporic dimension to the understanding of how the black female conjurer/healer character functions in the literary and historical spaces of black women’s experiences. While it is true that “conjuring has been an empowering concept for many black women [by] paying homage to an African past [and] providing a present day idiom for magic, power, and ancient wisdom within a pan-African cultural context,” (Lee 13) the character of Ti-Jeanne highlights the complex psychological and social negotiations of the postcolonial urban immigrant youth whose relationship to this African-based past is

conflicted. Only through learning to embrace her African spiritual heritage can Ti-Jeanne resist the hegemonic forces controlling her and her community.

*The Matrilineal Inheritance: Grannies and the Absent Mother*

Gretchen Michlitsch highlights Ti-Jeanne's character primarily for her role as a mother grappling with the intersections of womanhood, work, and breastfeeding. However, I want to shift the analytical frame to engage the cultural dimensions of mothering for Caribbean women in a diasporic context. Ti-Jeanne is a young single mother in an impoverished, urban setting; given the premium placed upon mothering and motherhood in the Caribbean home settings,<sup>43</sup> the near-futuristic setting of Canada places Ti-Jeanne's attitude towards motherhood in alignment with an urban lifestyle wherein youths who experience “premature” motherhood—that is, becoming pregnant prior to an ability to sufficiently care and provide for the child independently—as a burden.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, she takes advantage of the kinship support provided by her grandmother in learning to care for her child by moving back in with her grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, once she becomes pregnant.<sup>45</sup> Taking responsibility for the child and placing his welfare above her own needs for affection establishes her desire to be a good mother despite moments of impatience and frustration. Yet, Ti-Jeanne is still ambivalent about

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<sup>43</sup> See Olive Senior's chapter “The Concept of Motherhood” in *Working Miracles* which provides insight to the complex attitudes surrounding motherhood and early pregnancy in the Caribbean and Frances Henry's chapter on “Marriage, Relationships, and Family Organization” in *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto*.

<sup>44</sup> This is a phenomenon that occurs not only in the urban settings of the Diaspora, but in the urban spaces within the Caribbean where young women are lacking kinship networks or other support systems. See Erna Brodber's study *Abandonment of Children in Jamaica*, 1974.

<sup>45</sup> In a reversal of gender roles, Ti-Jeanne is the one to leave Tony upon learning that she is pregnant, citing Tony's irresponsibility as enough impetus to leave him without even telling him that he is the father. Social scientific study surrounding Caribbean male-female relationship patterns in Jamaica and the diaspora discusses the transience and/or absence of male partners in their relationships with Caribbean women; see Olive Senior's *Working Miracles* and Frances Henry's *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto*.

her role as mother. She did not want to have a baby; at times, her young patience wears thin with the demands placed upon her in this capacity. Additionally, Ti-Jeanne's attitude towards motherhood is profoundly influenced by the severance of the connection between her and her own mother, Mi-Jeanne, who disappeared during the Riots that created the Burn. Ti-Jeanne recalls the visions that her mother had begun having just prior to her disappearance, and which Ti-Jeanne is beginning to have as well. Fears of madness and the scars of abandonment combine to negatively impact her perception of the mother's roles and responsibilities. Upon learning that Ti-Jeanne has been having visions, Mami Gros-Jeanne warns "child, if you don't learn how to use [the spiritual gift], it will use you, just like it take your mother" (47). The rejection of motherhood and what it represents illuminates the impact of northern urban culture in shaping Ti-Jeanne's ambivalent attitude towards her role as mother as well as her emerging spiritual gifts. These issues of abandonment by the mother and the attendant associations of spiritual abilities with madness places the onus upon the grandmother to mediate these conflicting codes that simultaneously mark their spiritual gifts and practices as negative from a mainstream worldview and positive from an indigenous perspective. Ti-Jeanne receives guidance from her midwife/healer grandmother, Mami Gros-Jeanne, who teaches her to honor her heritage and calling as a "seer-woman" and healer. The relationship between Ti-Jeanne and Mami is complicated, however, by the exigencies of social norms and practices in Toronto, Canada. The colonial enterprise negatively impacted the perceptions of African-based curative practices both in Jamaica and continuing into metropolitan locales of migration like Canada and the U.S. such that these practices were pejoratively

labeled witchcraft by the Euro-dominant culture, or *obeah*<sup>46</sup> by Jamaican people seeking to dissociate themselves from the traditional practices. Thus, Ti-Jeanne is conditioned, in the Canadian context, to deny and/or hide this aspect of her Caribbean cultural heritage in interactions with the majority culture, and feels ambivalent about her and her grandmother's relationship to the tradition. Mami Gros-Jeanne, however, harbors no such inhibitions and self-consciousness regarding her skills and practice as a conjure woman. She is fully aware that the socio-economic conditions created after white flight has abandoned the inner city demands a reconstitution of traditional methods of coping and survival. Mami Gros-Jeanne now openly combines her western nursing training with her traditional herbal treatments to provide much-needed health care services to the financially impoverished inhabitants of the Burn. Regarding her spiritual practices, of which root-working and healing is a part, Mami asserts, "Is a gift from God Father. Is a good thing, not a evil thing" (47).

Ti-Jeanne, however, reflects the shame and embarrassment with which second and third generation Caribbean-Canadian folks have come to regard traditional Caribbean practices, and is resistant to learning and mastering the traditional knowledge Mami possesses. Even as she defends her grandmother as a seer-woman and healer against Tony, her ex-lover's, teasing, she is still uncertain about how she feels about Mami's practices:

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<sup>46</sup> *Obeah* is a contested term. While people from some parts of the Caribbean embrace the term as an empowering one to identify African-based spiritual practices, in many instances within and especially outside of the Caribbean, it is regarded as a pejorative label invoking the same connotation as "witchcraft" an identification which likely evolved during the colonial enterprise. This term was the center of discussion in many panels during the 2006 session of the Caribbean Women Writers as Scholars Conference in Hollywood, Florida.

“What’s that crazy old woman doing over in Riverdale Farm, eh, Ti-Jeanne? Obeah? Nobody believes in that duppy business anymore!”

“Is not obeah, Tony! Mami is a healer, a seer-woman! She does do good, not wickedness!” But Ti-Jeanne herself wasn’t so sure... [She] didn’t place too much stock in Mami’s bush doctor remedies. Sometimes herbs lost their potency, stored through Toronto’s long, bitter winters. And they had to guess at dosages. (36)

It is soon revealed to Ti-Jeanne that she must learn to use the spiritual gifts that are manifesting in her ability to see people’s deaths in the future.

Ti-Jeanne’s mother, Mi-Jeanne, presents the opposite example for Ti-Jeanne of how two-headed seer women might respond to the experience of spiritual gifts manifesting in a hostile and foreign environment where such “gifts” are regarded as evil. Mi-Jeanne foresaw the Riots that would result in the creation of the Burn and, refusing the help of Mami in integrating this ability and knowledge as part of her identity, she went mad and disappeared from their home (48). Understanding the importance of helping Ti-Jeanne to understand and, therefore, use her emerging abilities without going mad, Mami immediately begins the process of education to teach her everything she needs to know, a process that had already begun in the training of how to dry herbs and use them for healing purposes.

The character of Ella in *Louisiana* also faces the crisis of a young woman coming into her powers as a seer against the norms and standards of mainstream Western culture. Originally of Jamaican heritage, Ella Townsend is brought to the United States in early infancy after the grandmother with whom she was left in Jamaica dies. In the United States, she is reared by hard-working parents who work to provide her with access to respectability through a good education and hard work. At the time that the text opens, she is an adult in her late 20s working as a graduate student of anthropology at Columbia

University. She has been hired by the Works Project Association in the year 1936 to gather historical data in the form of oral histories on the subject of the Negro of South West Louisiana. Entrusted with the prototypical technology of a recording machine for this purpose, and granted this opportunity for research by the academy, she is prepared for conducting the field research as proigated by her Western training. She is not prepared, however, for the totality with which her informant, "Mammy" Sue Ann (Suzie Anna) Grant-King, takes control of the storytelling event to authenticate her history and experiences by hailing Ella into the tradition of seer women, revealing her/story in a manner which neither the academy nor the government is likely to accept. Thus, Ella's identity formation is multiply informed by her parents' expectations and attitudes, her Western anthropological background and training, and her emerging abilities as a spirit medium. As she begins to embrace her developing spiritual abilities and claim her role as a seer woman, her connections to the restrictive norms and expectations promulgated by her parents, and western society generally speaking, diminish significantly.

The relationship between Ella and her parents is clouded by feelings of abandonment and disconnectedness. As the primary connection to her Jamaican history and culture, they reveal very little to Ella about their lives prior to the United States, effectively stunting Ella's sense of herself as a Jamaican woman. They never their lives in Jamaica, and the mother only returns to retrieve the infant Ella several months after the grandmother dies. Throughout the text, bits of information about Ella's parents and their attitudes and influence on her life surface as she increasingly engages the folk culture of Jamaica as represented in the singing of folk songs and engaging in other "common" or lower-class practices (of which spirit mediumship certainly qualifies), attempting to



reconcile the upper-class values and strivings of her parents' generation as represented in Presbyterianism. As their only child, Ella bears the burden of actualizing her parents' aspirations for middle-class respectability and acculturation, and generates disappointment when she fails to live up to those expectations: "I was an egg, for those two people held in me the potential for all kinds of things they hadn't done and like an egg if I fell I could break and splatter all over their faces..." (Brodber 39).

This drive to uphold the expectations of decency and social ascendancy prescribed by her parents is one of the primary sources of concern inhibiting her ability to embrace what is happening to her in her interactions with Mammy Sue Ann, despite the fact that both her partner, Reuben, and the community of South West Louisiana, where her abilities are emerging, are supportive of what they recognize to be an obvious instance of the transfer of Mammy's soul to Ella's at Mammy's funeral:

They [the community members] had no problem...with the shouting and the violence and my unusual strength. They had seen it all before or had heard of it: it was quite consistent with the transfer of souls. I was being taken on a journey into knowing and was resisting as first timers sometimes do. They hoped my travel was fruitful. I was totally embarrassed. (38)

The resistance with which Ella treats the emergence of her abilities reveals the force with which her parents' desire for mainstream respectability influences her identity formation. Having already disappointed them by dropping out of medical school to be a writer and researcher, she asserts: "I knew my parents. I had them to protect. Was I to embarrass them further by becoming some hoodoo woman...?" (Brodber 41-42).

Although both parents are typically referenced throughout the text as exercising a great moralizing and authoritative influence over her life choices (what career to pursue,

what type of man to marry), it is the mother with whom she seemingly must reconcile her abandonment issues and the profound sense of disconnection not only from her parents, but from her culture as well. After the abandonment of her early childhood is revealed in one of her trances, she seeks to confront her mother, and, as Reuben points out, conspicuously seems to absolve the father from wrongdoing:

Only now was it safe to know the loneliness and despair, and to react. She sent money to take care of me; she sent parcels; she came when I was 18 months old. She dismissed those days: she never talked about them...It angered me, angered me deeply, that she had not left the door open for me to say thanks to those people who had cared for me in those crucial years... I decided to go back to New York and confront her. (Brodber 92)

Reuben talks Ella out of the confrontation and points out Ella's emphasis on the role of the mother. But Ella's interpretation of the situation is telling—the responsibility of maternal caring and cultural continuity lies primarily with mother, even despite the minimal experience of Jamaican culture handed to her from her parents.

Just as her parents place the measures of respectability and the duty to "advance the race" through proper modes of behavior upon Ella, access to and operation within the academic world operates as a means of authenticating and validating Ella's identity and subjective performance through Western discourses. Just as she is conflicted by the specter of disgracing her parents by becoming a "hoodoo woman," she and Reuben struggle with finding a way to explain the phenomenon of a third party recorded on the machine during her interviews with Mammy Sue Ann. Upon listening to the recording and realizing that Ella has been "mounted" to convey Mammy's story, Reuben asserts "there are different yet logical systems of knowledge and your director knows that, yet I don't think that he is ready for this" (46). With each psychic experience, Ella feels herself

moving away from decency and respectability afforded her by association with her scholastic base, until that connection is completely severed by her move to Louisiana to pursue training in the spiritual practices by Madam Marie. Aware that this move will sever her connections with the academy and the WPA project, she embraces the new life in training as a seer woman that awaits her in New Orleans.

Ella is not fully aware of the extent to which the change in her attitude through embracing her spiritual calling has altered her physical appearance until she is required to re-enter "respectable" society through a summons from her parents' lawyer. Ella, having changed her name to Louisiana to reflect her loving embrace of her spiritual heritage and the integration of Mammy Sue Ann and her sister/friend Louise, or Lowly, into her life through mediumship, now dresses in the (ostensibly) exotic garb of a Louisiana voodoo queen: long, loose flowing dresses, head wrapped to conceal unpressed hair. The encounter between Ella and the lawyer reveals the extent to which Ella's lifestyle as a "hoodoo woman" runs counter to the demands of respectability and social mobility:

The lawyer's first glance at me told a tale. I was something the cat had deposited on the mat. A chewed up rat. It had never struck me, nor did it Reuben, that to enter this part of America I would have to discard garments I had been wearing for years and find myself a more passable costume...At my entrance, Mr. Lukas turned cherry pink and I knew that it wasn't because I had grown into a big girl...

There and then I understood that for this world that I had once inhabited and had had to leave, I was mad... Mr. Lukas was more analytical than my first institutional contacts and less kind. Madness is sin. It is the not doing of what ought to be done. It is turning right upon its head and calling it wrong. It is a woman standing on her head in her loose garments and exposing her nakedness for the world to see. It is pulling down one's father's pants, pulling one's mother's skirts up to her waist. It is rejecting all that has been done for you. It is assuming your own position without embarrassment. Sin had entered Mr. Lukas' space in the form of one Ella Kohl, now called Louisiana, the former Ella Townsend. The heat of its lair which she brought with her was what reddened the dear man's

cheeks. I knew then—there was no need to tell me—that there was no record of a missing recording machine at Columbia. Through him, my parents had somehow paid for that first-edition-and-difficult-to-replace gadget and had paid off whatever else was necessary to expunge me and my history from their records. (133-134)

This encounter summarily relates the contempt with which respectable society, as promulgated by Ella's parents and the representatives/bastions of western institutions, regards the African-based ontological and epistemological heritage as represented by Ella and her "low and primitive" life in Louisiana. After years of one-sided communication through letters to her parents, Ella/Louisiana is summoned to New York to be informed that the connection between parents and child is formally severed through the passing on of her inheritance, the financial windfall of their years of industry and hard work in the United States. This financial inheritance is not what Ella would have had, but by now she knows that she has already achieved her true inheritance for herself through reconnection with her cultural and spiritual roots in Louisiana. The response to Ella's "madness" in loving her Caribbean culture is erasure by the mainstream Western culture.

Ti-Jeanne and Ella both struggle with the role that the absence of the mother plays in the healthful integration of Caribbean culture and heritage as part of their subjective identities and locate other mothers and teachers who operate as social and cultural surrogates. Ultimately, they are able to embrace an identity which their immediate parents have taught them to deny, if not despise; through the support of elders and ancestors, the transition to the status of seer-woman is eased. Yet, the exigencies of hegemonic space remain a complex force in influencing the protagonists's abilities to develop their subjective spiritual identities. The next section examines more fully the

effects of the condition of exile on the production of culture-affirming space and the reconstitution of a home place for each of these characters.

*Hegemony of the Spirit: Accepting the Call*

Hopkinson and Brodber offer differing causes for the initial cultural and spiritual disconnectedness experienced by protagonists Ti-Jeanne and Ella while revealing similar visions of the ways in which that cultural connectedness is re-established. Central to this ebb and flow of disconnection and re-establishment, however, is the ambivalence, if not outright disrespect, with which African-based spirituality and its practitioners are regarded in Northern American contexts, not only by white folk, but by Caribbean black folk as well. Ti-Jeanne and Ella are coming into their powers as two-headed seer women in cultures that only affirm that which is scientifically verifiable. The secrecy with which Mami Gros-Jeanne operated prior to the Riots regarding these practices was perceived by granddaughter Ti-Jeanne as shame or embarrassment rather than the survival strategy that it was. Thus, passing on the traditions becomes increasingly difficult for Mami Gros-Jeanne as the second and third generations, her daughter and granddaughter, resist the practices as backward or superstitious.

Ella's parents, on the other hand, represent a conscious effort to break with Jamaican Afro-spiritual practices and traditions by completely severing Ella from her Jamaican roots and propagating, instead, a sterile Episcopalian religious ideology. Theirs is not a practice of dissemblance or covert syncretism to preserve practices; rather, they prefer to dissociate from those Jamaican practices that would mark them as African-descended, practices most readily recognizable in folkways and spiritual practices.

For both Ti-Jeanne and Ella, social and cultural integration is only enabled through learning to claim their heritage enough to accept their spiritual “calling,”<sup>47</sup> despite the fear of alienation from loved ones that accompanies such a decision. In the case of Ti-Jeanne, spiritual heritage is constructed as an undeniable and inseparable part of her being-ness that nonetheless threatens to alienate her from her former lover, Tony. The visions that signal her innate abilities as a seer begin spontaneously and escalate to the point where they seem to be entering into her everyday life; she is increasingly unable to make distinctions between her visions and ordinary reality. Without the education, rituals, and practices that operate to create the religious practice and enable her to understand their meaning, purpose, and possibilities, she is doomed to the fate of her mother--madness.

Similarly, Ella is fully aware of the potential for her parents’ disavowal in her decision to move forward with her process of spiritual discovery. And like Ti-Jeanne, she has no control over these abilities’ manifestation; she has been called, and she must answer. The similarities depart, however, in that while madness in *Brown Girl* is constructed as the *failure* to claim spiritual inheritance and to integrate the spiritual and secular selves according to African spiritual beliefs, centering the necessity of training and community support to achieve psychic balance (rendered possible by the fact that the ‘dominant culture’ has left the Others to themselves), Brodber reveals how madness remains a fully present accusation leveled against Ella for defecting from her European

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<sup>47</sup> In most African, Caribbean, and black American spiritual traditions, spiritual leaders believe that they must receive the divine call; they do not self-select to enter any ministry or role of spiritual leadership. A direct calling by “the holy spirit” or the spirits is required, usually accompanied by some sort of spiritual awakening or experience. It is typical for the spiritual calling to also be associated with particular familial lineages.

knowledge base to African-based beliefs and practices. While Ella knows herself to achieve psychic and spiritual wholeness, she is regarded, as revealed in the exchange with her parents' lawyer referenced earlier, as mad by mainstream culture, in which she simultaneously exists and does not exist.

For those representatives of mainstream culture (the lawyer, her parents), the dichotomies— between modern/primitive, respectability/moral untenability, Christian/pagan, Western/Northern/Jamaican/Caribbean, sin/perfectability, madness/sanity—are rigid and distinct. Yet, Ella discovers ways to even integrate aspects of her Episcopalian upbringing to validate her identity as link between the living and the dead. Upon discovering the connection between the African burial rites of Mammy and Lowly and the transience of death, she is reminded of a verse from her mother's Episcopalianism: "Death where is thy sting? Grave where is thy victory?" (52). Later, as she is further developing her sense of self as a seer woman and the events that have transpired to make her so, she turns to the Bible under the direction of Madam Marie, who is herself "Biblical": "The Bible is taking up my time: it fascinates me. I'm glad Madam brought it into my life" (99). She locates resonances in the Bible that affirm what has happened to her, particularly in the Elijah/Elisha story: "here is definite recorded proof that what has been happening to me has happened to someone else before. A mantle had been passed before... And the bonus: all Bible-reading people, and they are many, know this and therefore know that I am not strange. This I need to know" (99). Thus, she is further stabilized in her identity by locating evidence for both her experience in Western/Northern cultural constructs and that which is attributable to the African influences on black cultures. Her spiritual evolution becomes clear as she moves from

questioning her own sanity upon the initial finding that there is an additional voice, both hers and not hers, on the reel to affirming and integrating all that she has become in the assertion to her parents' lawyer that it is not she who is mad, but rather that madness, which is to say sin, "is in the eye of the beholder" (135).

### **Technology Re-Imagined through Self-Theorizing Genres**

If *Brown Girl in the Ring* is "consistently recognized as a hybrid" genre, (Michlitsch 18, Gregory 3) it is likely attributable to the legacy of traditional African ideology that operates in Afro-Caribbean philosophy and discourse, that impetus to "incorporate a number of competing themes into well-integrated totalities" (Henry 5). Hopkinson acknowledges that, "when my work comes from a Caribbean context, fusion fits very well; that's how we survived" (Nelson 99). Highlighting the myriad areas wherein Hopkinson actualizes fusion, Michlitsch asserts "Brown Girl in the Ring is situated at a junction between the traditional and the new, between futuristic technology and traditional spiritual understanding, between BBC English and Caribbean Patois, and, generically, between Afro-Caribbean trickster stories and classic science fiction" (18-19). Gregory expands upon this assertion, stating that her work "challenge(s) the artificial boundaries that exist between different subgenres of science fiction" (3), noting both the dystopian and utopian elements that persist in situating it firmly within the realm of science fiction (8). This is imperative in articulating Hopkinson's work as a hybrid genre, particularly as Gregory reveals the manner in which "[Hopkinson] exploits the degree to which science fiction renders the unreal real and creates an atmosphere of alienating defamiliarization for readers who stand as 'outsiders' in relation to New World African religions" (5). She goes on to argue, "By engaging this spiritual world, Hopkinson



politicizes her text by writing from the normative point of view of many within the African Diaspora. In this way, she encodes a mystical dimension distinct from the dominant culture" (5). McGregory convincingly articulates the ways in which Hopkinson fuses a Caribbean spiritual epistemological framing with science fiction conventions, preferring the concept of "mystical realism" to challenge the overuse of magical realism (5).<sup>48</sup> In a closer examination of this fusion, I examine the specific science fiction icons and conventions utilized in *Brown Girl* to reveal the particular transmutations that occur through the invocation of Caribbean epistemological framings. The science fiction tropes engaged in the following section are that of 1) the icon of the city; 2) the remarkable adventure; 3) the "everyman" superhero protagonist; and 4) the use of technology.

#### *The Icon of the City*

Much of science fiction is concerned with the future vision of the world as people increasingly migrate to the cities (Warrick 8, Cogswell & Clem 359). Science fiction utilizes the icon of the City to engage the meanings people assign to their vision of this social arrangement and human beings' interactions/ roles within the city through the "extrapolation of contemporary (and critically important) social problems" (Cogswell & Clem 359). The primary depiction of the City in science fiction has been that of the dystopia, an urban setting in which "the undesirable aspects of contemporary society, presumably allowed to continue unchecked or not amenable to solution, are acted out" (Cogswell & Clem 362).

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<sup>48</sup> This concept accomplishes a similar goal to my own concept of spiritual realism discussed in the introduction.

Certainly, Hopkinson's *Brown Girl* can be characterized as a dystopian vision of Toronto, Canada (McGregory, Michlitsch) with some utopian elements blended into it. The Suburbs presumably represent the safe, sanitized spaces that continue to benefit from industrial and technological advances. This is the utopia to which Tony aspires in seeking a way out of his present life. If he can escape to the suburbs, he can find work that pays money so that he can support himself, Ti-Jeanne and the baby. His addiction to buff and the influence that it has had—will continue to have on his life without intervention—does not play into his dream scenario, nor does it seem to occur to him that he has had any agency in the choices he has made in his present life. Thus as Polh, et al indicate, "if the function of utopia is to show us what a fine life we might have so we can strive towards it, the function of the dystopia is to show us what misery we may all-unknowing be in, so that we can escape it" (397).

Upon initial glance, then, Mr. Reed's newspaper clipping collage seems to support this vision of the Burn as dystopia, tracing the events that cause the economic collapse of Toronto's city center after the riots and depicting the city from the mainstream standpoint as a "disaster zone." Rather than rebuild and reinvest in the city, Toronto's economic and governmental infrastructures relocate, leaving the poor to struggle with surviving on whatever is left. The blight seems total. The amenities of developed societies are no longer available; there is no electricity, no running water, no convenient grocery stores to buy clean, sanitized food, and no jobs or money to pay for medical care or needs. This dystopic vision, from the mainstream perspective would seem to preclude any positive action or outcomes for the residents.

Yet, Hopkinson's vision of near-future Toronto is more complex than a simple dystopia/utopia binary. There are examples of agency undertaken by members of the community to survive collectively. The Burn represents the possibility and potential of survival beyond the technological and industrial parameters that presumably construct future worlds; the urban spaces are transformed and adapted to by the many cultures left behind, and the pluralistic community that binds together is, for the most part, one that espouses the values of mutual cooperation, respect, and sharing. All have their own skills or areas of expertise necessary for the survival of the whole, and given the failures of technology around them, they have managed their survival quite well independent of either contemporary or futuristic technologies.

#### *The Remarkable Adventure*

Yet another hinge on which the classic science fiction tale swings is the narrative structure of the remarkable adventure. Farmer & Friend characterize it as follows:

The Great Adventure Story, in ancient time or new, is always about the individual who has a goal and makes a long and dangerous physical journey to achieve that goal... Though there may be mysterious events and murky sinister forces behind the scenes, in the end all becomes clear... Everything is eventually explainable by *logic* and *science*... What appears magic can be (and often is) explained or at least deemed explainable to one able to grasp the *complicated scientific principles*, and this accounts for the hero's transportation, his weaponry, his entire lifestyle. (39-41) [Emphasis mine.]

Hopkinson's tale subverts the classical ordering of the great adventure story, then, by positioning the goal and journey to be achieved as an inherited one; the task of ending Rudy's tyrannical reign would not have fallen to Ti-Jeanne if Mami Gros-Jeanne or Mi-Jeanne had obeyed the spirits and taken the necessary actions to end his tyranny. Further,

the apparent magic and mystery that serve to befuddle and alienate the typical hero, coming from the alien forces he encounters, is actually a tool of the hero herself. Thus, the explanation of strange events and "magic" is not rendered through an enhanced understanding of "complicated scientific principles," but through an acknowledgment of and obeisance to complex spiritual laws, which possess their own type of logic as manifested in the trickster tradition. Whereas the classical scientific tradition presupposes an inevitability of outcomes as predicated upon the fixed and knowable limits of scientific rationale,<sup>49</sup> the invocation of spiritual laws permits a flexibility through the animism of the unknown; cunning and wit can be—and frequently are—employed to negotiate the protagonist's achievement of her goal. Thus, when Ti-Jeanne negotiates for time with the duppy that Rudy has sent to kill her and Tony, she is drawing upon the logic of her spiritual traditions passed down through folk tales and religious practices. The duppy is the trapped spirit of her mother, Mi-Jeanne, and she must come to recognize it as a sentient being with some cognizance of what it does and can, therefore, enter into negotiations within certain limits:

"Mummy, wait," Ti-Jeanne begged hopelessly.

To her surprise, the duppy held off for a moment... But the duppy's claws were already scrabbling at Tony's whimpering throat. Its daughter's plea held it for now, but in a second it would have to do its master's bidding. *It had to do what Rudy said.*

"Rudy tell you to kill we, yes?"

The maddened red eyes seemed to agree with her.

"But he ain't tell you *when*, Mummy, and he ain't tell you *where*?"

Ain't?"

Had the duppy's crazed swirling slowed down a little? Desperately Ti-Jeanne started talking again, hoping that some kind of plan would emerge from her babbling. "That's right, that's right. You could take we

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<sup>49</sup> In other words, with scientific rationale, there is one "right" answer that, if properly understood, explains everything, that orders the sequence of causality and which ultimately fixes and/or limits outcomes for the hero and his environment.

anywhere, kill we there, you still go be doing what Rudy tell you. Right, Mummy?" (164-165).

The duppy's claws pulled back from Tony's neck... What could she say that would draw out their lives a little more, give them a chance?  
[Author's emphasis]

Through wit and cunning, Ti-Jeanne successfully negotiates with the duppy, telling it that she will set it free by breaking Rudy's dead bowl, and buying the time that she needs to survive the moment.

*The Superhero Chic(k)*

A major part of the revision of the remarkable adventure story that Hopkinson weaves is through her use of a female "hero." Farmer & Friend assert that the hero of the great adventure is usually male, either of heroic mold or a common man, and "is seldom lured, even more seldom carried away, and almost always rushes headlong into his adventure" (42). Gretchen Michlitsch articulates the multiple ways in which Ti-Jeanne subverts the superhero icon through her gendered status as a breastfeeding working mother. Burdened with multiple duties and roles to which she must subscribe, she is reluctant to "rush headlong into adventure," propelled to act only after the murder of her grandmother, the revelation that it is the spirit of her mother, Mi-Jeanne, who Rudy has trapped in his duppy bowl, and the knowledge that Rudy intends to kill both she and Tony. Her reluctance to be anyone's superwoman is revealed in an exchange with Tony after she has negotiated with the duppy to keep them alive, suggesting that it lead them to Rudy's headquarters so that she can keep her promise of setting it free:

"You want, you want me to... free you, ain't it? Find Rudy dead bowl and break it, so you don't have to kill no more? Well, take we there before you kill we. Take we to Rudy place."

Tony grabbed her wrist. His eyes were wide. "Woman, like you mad or what?"...

"Yes, I mad," she answered him, firmly pulling her wrist from his grasp. She stood up. The duppy lifted itself off Tony's chest and coalesced into a red fireball. It hovered above them, waiting. "I mad like France," Ti-Jeanne said. "Mad like that old woman jumbie thing who used to be my mother. I mad at all of allyou for making me run around and trying to save allyou, but allyou just digging yourselves in deeper, each one in he own pit." (165)

Her responsibility for her mother's soul, and the lives of her former lover and the baby significantly complicates the role of the traditional adventure-seeking protagonist and reveals the exigencies of gendered familial responsibility in the metaphor of tied apron strings: "Ti-Jeanne went into her room to get Baby; Tony and the fireball followed her as if attached to her apron strings... Baby looked at her, reached for her. Another life tied to her apron strings" (166). Her role as mother places her as the common woman in contrast to classical science fiction's common man or "everyman."

But these responsibilities also fall upon Ti-Jeanne because of her inescapable and inherent status as a healer and seer-woman and the responsibilities attendant to that status. Few others are equipped to do battle with Rudy's spiritual arsenal; only one born with similar spiritual gifts can even begin to engage him. Ti-Jeanne inherits the spiritual gifts and the responsibilities of being a seer-woman/healer passed down through the mother's line, and Mami's training along with her spirit guide, Prince of Cemetery, prepare her for the battle with Rudy. Thus, while Ti-Jeanne is constructed as a kind of common "everywoman," she is simultaneously of a heroic mold by virtue of her spiritual capabilities. She is both common and extraordinary, spiritual and secular.

#### *Hybrid Technologies in New World Spaces*

The customary "modern" technologies of reliable electricity, automobiles, running water, and so forth which have become standard part of developed societies fails the

residents of the Burn once the city core is abandoned. While they are compelled to return to pastoral-like subsistence modified to accommodate their urban setting, however, they are not devoid of their own technologies produced within the specific knowledge stores of their own cultures. These they have adapted to fit their new conditions in the new environment, reconstituting the characterization of technology. The Afro-Caribbean characters, in particular, bring together spirituality and technology to propagate extraordinary feats that could only be possible in the liminal urban space of the Burn, a space which is neither fully modern nor fully traditional.

Rudy, for example, utilizes a combination of Caribbean technologies and Northern scientific technologies to trap Ti-Jeanne and Tony. Primary among them is his duppy bowl, a tool for prolonging his life and youthful vitality. It also extends his vision beyond the walls of the CN Tower to spy on whomever he wishes. His use of the duppy bowl in this manner is how he knows when and where to trap Ti-Jeanne and Tony with the synapse cordon. The synapse cordon generates an electromagnetic net that short-circuits the neuro-muscular system and keeps Tony and Ti-Jeanne from moving, countering the efficacy of Mami and Prince of Cemetery's technology.

Ti-Jeanne is now placed in a position where she must imagine for herself how to utilize the resources already available that need only to be re-framed in context of a spiritual lens. The CN Tower becomes, in and of itself, a tool that enables the powerful feat of calling down all the orishas and summoning up all of Rudy's murder victims to exact punishment for his spiritual crime of soul thievery and murder. Spiritual life, material life, and technological life converge in the moment that Ti-Jeanne calls them,

creating a dynamic moment of hybrid integration that achieves the heroine's goal of abolishing evil.

The spiritual episteme not only manifests itself in the technologies wielded by Rudy and Ti-Jeanne, but also encroaches on the technologies of the industrialized suburban experience. When Premier Uttley receives Mami Gros-Jeanne's heart, she also receives her spirit. In what is tantamount to a biological and spiritual takeover, Mami's heart transplanted into Premier Uttley shuts down all the organs in her body so that Mami's energy can fully integrate with the entirety of Premier Uttley's mind, body and spirit; in other words, Premier Uttley must share her mind, body and spirit with the person who she sacrificed that she might live:

*Bit by bit, she was losing the ability to control her own body. The heart was taking it over...*

*And then she was aware again. Her dream body and brain were hers once more, but with a difference. The heart—her heart—was dancing joyfully between her ribs. When she looked down at herself she could see the blood moving through her body to its beat. In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined. She had worried for nothing... "Stupidness," she said, chiding herself... (237)*

Mami Gros-Jeanne's spirit actively lives on in Uttley, changing her attitude and her intentions so that she performs the kind of work that will have positive outcomes for the people in the Burn rather than continuing her previous ruthless patterns of use and abuse.

Brodber's text also crosses boundaries, offering, as it does, commentary upon the social scientific field of anthropology, problematizing the methodology of scientific inquiry in engagement with the spiritual aspects of life in what might be described as a



biographical speculation on the events of the life of Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>50</sup> More of a metadiscourse on social scientific methodology, the actual form of the text conflates that of private journal with anthropological researcher's field notes, moving the process of the production of knowledge out of the hands of the academy and rendering it a communal process. Reuben completes the text after Ella falls ill, continuing to record the information that she channels; the editors of a small black woman's press, into whose hands the text has fallen years later, fill in the gaps regarding Ella's manuscript, verifying her existence and speculating on the events that transpired surrounding her apparent desertion of the WPA project.

Brodber's text bends science fiction tropes further, for where the failure of technology typically propels the heroine into action, in Brodber's text the technology works too well. Central to the texts' engagement with social scientific discourse and the complicating exigencies of spiritual intervention is the technology of the recording machine. The latest in field research technology at the time of her deployment by the Works Project Association, the black recording box functions as the tool by which field workers ensure their own accuracy in the collection of oral narratives. It records and therefore verifies that which is supposed to be scientifically impossible: the voice and story of Lowly/Louise, long dead for many years in conversation with Mammy Suzie Anna. In spite of the difficulty of explaining the third voice on the recording machine's reel, Ella realizes that the phenomenon of what is happening to her – the progressive

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<sup>50</sup> The parallels between the life of Hurston and the fictional Ella Townsend are several: the time frame that the text spans loosely correlates to the time in which Hurston was publishing literary works in leading black journals of the day, which the character of Ella has done; both embark upon careers in anthropology and conduct field work on the negroes of the south, particularly voodoo/hoodoo culture of Louisiana, both work for the WPA, and both fall into relative obscurity as their lives progress.

verification of her participation as a spirit medium—constitutes a break from the mainstream and academic worlds:

I had resolved the issue of my relationship to the academy way back when I decided to keep the recording machine and follow Mrs. Forbes into New Orleans. You can hardly change more than that. Following Mrs. Forbes to New Orleans, keeping a rare article which you know is not yours, putting the race on the line and leaving them to say they knew it all the time – “born thieves,” “born shirkers!” It would have been difficult to explain the contents on the reel, but I could have found a story and remained in academia if I had wanted to. Jung! Parapsychology! Pah! (90)

Thus, it is not the failure of technology that propels the protagonist into heroic action, but the technology’s verification of the scientifically/rationalistically impossible that renders a new understanding of what constitutes heroic action. In breaking with the academy and exceeding the limits of social scientific objective inquiry even beyond the parameters of participant observation methodology, she fully surrenders to the process of subjective knowing. Given her experience in the field, she even ventures to name the methodological process that she is engaging: “I stepped back a bit to ask myself what was my head into – the anthropology of the dead? Celestial ethnography?” (61). Later, after her move to New Orleans, she is informed that the community already possesses language to articulate the process of mediumship:

...there is a name for that state in which your body is depressed into physical collapse and something else is activated... ‘Getting over.’ I prefer to call it hegemony of the spirit. I had experienced hegemony of the spirit. I could again and would. This is common knowledge around here and my mind and I are being left to the ‘fullness of time.’ (98).

Thus, Ella’s act of heroism is located in the validation of the knowledge of common black folk over and above that of western academic discourses that would likely disavow

the occurrences as in-credible. In her submission to this process and world view, she affirms African epistemological frames of reference and ways of knowing.

Just as technology is re-cast in *Brown Girl*, Brodber re-appropriates the uses of technology, creolizing the recording machine by constructing it as equivalent to Anancy's magic pot of the classic Jamaican folk tale. Each time that she completes one set of transcriptions of the information on the reel, there is always new information when she returns to listen to the reel again. And just as the technology is rendered obsolete in the academic world by the passage of time when she attempts to return the machine to the university years later, so is the machine ultimately unnecessary for her own "data collection" as her powers increase and she incorporates her identity into that of Louisiana (131). Outmoded in both world views, the recording machine is dumped in the garbage outside of a juvenile rehabilitation center.

Thus, through the discursive interrogation of social scientific theory and methodology and the insinuation of African spiritual practices as disruptive influences, Brodber challenges scientific academic paradigms in a manner complementary to Hopkinson's subversion of classic scientific fiction, destabilizing the very principles upon which all genre science fiction is predicated. That this disruption occurs through the agency of African-descended seer women learning to embrace their powers in a New World context avers the saliency of African religious traditions in the lives of black people. The characters of Ti-Jeanne and Ella, in order to salvage and/or support the healing of their communities must first claim their spiritual heritage and inheritance. Only then are they able to reinvigorate the uses of technology to incorporate their specific needs and concerns despite the negating attitudes that exist in western, northern, urban

environs. Their reimagined uses of technology far exceed the mainstream intentions and actually authenticate and enable African-based New World hybrid processes. In breaking the discursive and generic rules of scientific literary traditions, Hopkinson and Brodber offer imaginative directions for reconceptualizing the untenable distinctions between scientific/subjective, first world/third world, modern/primitive, Self/Other.

## CHAPTER 4

### “THE CHILD OF OUR TODAY:”<sup>51</sup>

#### SHAPING FUTURE COMMUNITIES THROUGH A LIBERATORY THEOLOGY IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER* AND *PARABLE OF THE TALENTS*

“*We forget history at our peril.*”

~Octavia Butler

This chapter engages Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, revealing the development of a diversified spiritual system, Earthseed by protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina. Grounded in the energies of Oya, the Yoruba goddess of change, Earthseed becomes a liberation theology galvanized by its potential for engendering a radicalized spirituality that embraces difference and change as its subversive force for survival. Olamina, as the founder and ideological mother of the religion, reflects an ethic of care that suggests an African-based spirituality that extends its reach beyond the traditional notion of spirituality as individualistic self-transformation to a broader, more global cultural transformation.<sup>52</sup> In its articulation and actualization, it moves adherents to the system towards a more expansive vision of community as

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<sup>51</sup> Octavia Butler, "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," *Essence*. May 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Even though Butler's characters and story lines would typically seem to project a cynicism about human nature and human limitations, especially in times of social stress, I find the *Talents* to be among her most hopeful extrapolations of futuristic paradigms. The fact that Olamina's liberation strategy works only by developing community and trust in others works in social conditions where one would presume that individualistic strategies would be optimal suggests that at the core of her cautionary tale resides a spiritual epistemology à la Martin Luther King (The Beloved Community) and Alice Walker that promotes the salvation of the entire community, not just a select few. In light of the abuses that blacks in America have suffered, only love undergirding spirituality could provide the moral force to espouse and act upon this kind of thinking.

ideology—an ectopia, as opposed to utopia or dystopia. The result is success; Olamina's liberation ideology revolutionizes the lives of its adherents as it achieves its ultimate goal of taking root among the stars, building the first communities in outer space. Butler challenges normative science fiction literary conventions by foregrounding spiritual life and ideology as a potentially foundational feature of propagating future communities that embrace change and difference

The first section of this chapter offers a brief overview of black speculative women writers in the United States. It is brief because, unlike the other regions wherein more expansive explication of the conditions for black women writing speculative fictions was required due to the relatively singular statuses of the authors engaging the genre, the United States represents a greater proliferation and therefore appears less "anomalous" in its production. The first section, then, speaks more so to the necessity of infusing a black and feminine perspective in the speculative literature of the United States as a trend that stems from larger concerns with establishing a distinctive black voice in American society and culture generally. The chapter then moves directly into analysis of the significance of the African groundings of Lauren's hybridized religion, Earthseed, and how Lauren's subjectivity as a young, black, disabled, androgynous, female religious leader informs her theology towards the development of liberated community.

### **Black Speculative Women in the United States**

African American writers Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler have stood alone for years as the sole African American contributors to the science fiction genre until very recently. The Northern American context of the United States, where white people have been the primary writers, readers and critics of science fiction, constitutes yet another

space where blacks have worked to assert their presence and articulate their status as not only citizens, but as a distinctive force shaping the national imaginary. Blacks in the United States have borne, historically, the arduous task of first and foremost articulating an actual and distinct African heritage and/or sensibility informing social and artistic practices to respond to the ongoing perception that "most of [black Americans' African heritage] was quickly and inevitably lost" (Herskovits, x). Black thinkers then moved forward to articulate the ways in which black culture has been a distinct and ever-present reality in American culture. In the literary arena, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* asserts the way in which, even in denying the physical presence and voice of black characters in mainstream American novels, the African presence haunts the texts of writers such as Hemingway and Faulkner to reveal insights into the reality of social relations in the United States. Specifically addressing science fiction, Sandra Govan observes that "science fiction as a genre has seldom evoked an authentic African setting or employed non-stereotypical blacks as characters" (83). Black American science fiction writers join the historical act of asserting an African presence to every aspect of culture.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, this chapter explores Sheree Thomas' assertion that "an examination of African diasporic speculative fiction from the past century may shed new light on both the science fiction genre and the mainstream literary canon" (Dark Matter I, xi).

Octavia Butler is the first black female writer to be acknowledged and critically acclaimed as a speculative and science fiction writer in the United States. The godmother of African American science fiction and fantasy, she was the lone black female voice in the field for close to twenty years. Recently, however, she is joined by the likes of

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<sup>53</sup> See works by Ivan van Sertima, Toni Morrison, Carlos Moore, and Rod Davis among others.

Jewelle Gomez, Tananarive Due, Wanda Coleman, Andrea Hairston, Nisi Shawl, Kiini Ibura Salaam, Evie Shockley and Sheree Thomas. These new black female writers emerging in the past ten to fifteen years promise to continue the inquiry into human nature, science, change and personal agency that speculative fiction provides the opportunity to explore.

If among the regions of the Caribbean, Brazil, and North America, black women in the United States have had a longer presence of writers within the genre of science fiction, they, among the three, have had a less developed representation of African-based spiritual expression within both cultural experience and literary textual framing. In the *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Butler infuses that aspect which I argue is one of salient features of the sensibility connecting blacks across the Diaspora in the Americas: that of an African spiritual epistemology.<sup>54</sup>

*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* (the *Parables* to refer to the two texts collectively, and *Sower* and *Talents* respectively, hereafter) possibly constitute one of the few attempts to offer solutions to the problems frequently raised within science and speculative fictions through the development of an alternative spiritual ideology. The *Parables* offer meditations on the potential problems that we are headed towards if we continue to ignore social trends and the many possible solutions that may be generated should such situations ever escalate to the proportions described in the texts. The question

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<sup>54</sup> In Black American literature especially, there seems to be a less apparent and/or robust expression of African spiritual traditions and practices in comparison to the literary and cultural expression of blacks from the other regions discussed in the preceding two chapters. This is not to suggest that it does not exist; but rather that the spaces in which African spiritual practices have survived are less pervasive than in the Caribbean and Brazil, but yet have been revived through various avenues such as folklore and literature as an aspect of African American identity (See John Roberts *From Trickster to Badman*, Valerie Lee *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers* among others).



becomes, will we learn from the past, or are we doomed to repeat it; and if we are to repeat history, then how will we be saved? Butler's vision bears striking resemblance to moments in American history where the Other has been scapegoated by those in power as a means of restoring order and unity under the banner bearing the false image of American glory that is white, male, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Butler posits the multiply liminal position of a black, disfranchised, disabled woman in the character of Lauren Oya Olamina as the source from which is derived an alternative liberatory spiritual discourse that engenders a new sense of community that I term *ectopia*, the normalizing of literal and discursive place as a constantly shifting condition of liminality. This liberation theology enacts community as ideology, becoming the saving grace for multitudes through attentiveness to the environment and an ethic of caring. Olamina's Earthseed religion epitomizes not only the tenets of survivalist discourse, but articulates the values we should cultivate to preserve the “child of our today” (Butler interview).

Taking place during the time period of 2024—2090, *The Parables* reveal the physical and spiritual journey of protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina. *Sower* opens with Olamina experiencing a nightmare on the eve of her fifteenth birthday. She is reared in a southern California community called Robledo inside a walled-in cul-de-sac; it is a time of devastation in the history of the nation later referred to as the Apocalypse, or “the Pox” for short. As one character describes it, “the Pox was caused by our refusal to deal with obvious problems in the areas [of climatic, economic, and sociological problems]” ... creating the “effect of an installment plan World War III” (Talents 8). California has become devastated by global warming trends created by government's laissez-faire attitude towards big business and a loosening of environmental policies, the privatization

of utilities that govern basic life necessities such as water, decreased funding for public education that makes literacy a privilege of the elite, and the unbounded proliferation of drugs, poverty, and hunger because of the continued neglect of these far-ranging social issues. Times are bleak, and Olamina is in search of a belief system that will enable her and other like-minded individuals to survive the times with their sense of humanity intact. By the end of *Talents* in the year 2090, she has developed the Earthseed religion/philosophy that has grown into a social movement whose destiny to "take root among the stars" becomes a reality.

### **The Spiritual Groundings of Earthseed, Hybrid Religion of Change**

The axle on which the *Parables* turns is the search for a spiritual/religious praxis that not only responds to the harsh conditions of the times, but that will enable believers to move beyond denial, complacency, and inertia and actually survive. This is an increasingly difficult task since social conditions are such that it is generally dangerous to trust "outsiders." And as communities burn to the ground and members scatter, the number of people who they know they can trust rapidly dwindles. Earthseed, the name of the spiritual/religious belief system articulated by Olamina, is a "network of truths" combining ancient, contemporary and futuristic belief systems that shape her theology and practice in both subtle and obvious ways. She feels that people need something practical and salient to believe in and work towards if they are to survive. The religion of her father, a preacher of the Baptist faith, she views as an impractical and outmoded way of thinking about how to deal with the harsh changes within the current era. Having grown up under the perilous environment of "the Pox," she does not recall "the good old days" when food and water were affordable and abundant and cars were a commonality

rather than a luxury meant only for the extremely wealthy. All she knows is increasing poverty and misery, and senseless death and destruction. Thus, at the age of twelve, Olamina had already begun to formulate the doctrine that will be her code of ethics and survival for the even more treacherous times ahead. A combination of her Baptist roots, Buddhist philosophy, other ‘world religions’ and scientific logic, the belief system centers on the idea that the only undeniable, all-powerful force that exists is change. Therefore, God is Change; not a benign being, but an all-powerful force that must be attended. She writes,

Everyone knows that change is inevitable. From the second law of thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism’s insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence to the third chapter of Ecclesiastes (“To everything there is a season....”), change is part of life, of existence, of common wisdom. But I don’t believe we’re dealing with all that that means. We haven’t even begun to deal with it. (Sower 26)

Her religion of Earthseed attends to this all-powerful force. Never a comforting ideology, but one based on hard realities and truth as people of the time are experiencing them, this spiritual ideology calls for a break from Olamina’s Baptist roots, and the belief system is thrust into practice when the Robledo community is burned down. She feels her belief system is better equipped to enable people to survive the times than her father’s religion.

While John Pfeiffer has pointed out the clearly Christian influences upon Earthseed philosophy, the doctrine does not owe its substance solely to Christianity. Certainly, it would have been difficult for Olamina not to have been influenced by the teachings of Christianity having grown up as the daughter of a Baptist minister. She utilizes the parables of the Old Testament as guides for shaping her own philosophy and praxis for surviving her contemporary world. She takes what is useful and applicable to

current circumstances from Christian teaching and incorporates elements from other teachings that create a viable system that helps her understand and negotiate the world in which she is living. Even while Butler utilizes aspects of Christianity as a strong undercurrent in the basis of developing/articulating the Earthseed philosophy, she also offers a critique of Christianity's apparent failings and contradictions as exhibited by individual believers in *Sower* and the larger national community in *Talents*. Acceptance of her father's religion becomes particularly problematic for her early on when Mrs. Sims, one of her father's most consistent church attendees, commits suicide after things take a turn for the worse for her and her family. Her faith seems false, hypocritical, for someone who claimed to adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible and the belief in the eternal damnation of those who commit suicide. Considering Mrs. Sims' death, Olamina asks herself,

How could she do that?  
Did she really believe in anything at all? Was it all hypocrisy?  
Or maybe she just went crazy because her God was demanding too  
much of her. She was no Job. In real life, how many people are?  
(*Sower* 23-24).

Olamina is unwilling to accept her father's God, who demands that His followers be "long-suffering, stiff-necked, then, at last, either humble before an all-knowing almighty, or destroyed" (25). Instead, her god, as her husband Taylor Bankole understands it, is "a process or a combination of processes, not an entity. It is not consciously aware of her—or of anything... 'God is Change,' she says and means it. Yet Earthseed is not a fatalistic belief system. God can be directed, focused, speeded, slowed, shaped. All things change, but all things need not change in all ways. God is inexorable, yet malleable. Odd. Hardly religious at all" (*Talents* 50). Olamina's conception of religion

is vastly different from traditional models in its focus on practical tenets and the immanence of survival and living the life that exists here on this Earth. It is a religion of survival.

Olamina's religious philosophy is shaped to incorporate the forward-thinking “truths” of scientific laws; thus, if God is Change, then some of the many aspects of Change are seen in the ideas of biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and the second law of thermodynamics (Talents 50). Olamina’s destiny for Earthseed is to “take root among the stars,” a literal colonization of other worlds and planets through space programs and technology. The practicality of her religion forces believers to recognize the inevitable inhabitability of the Earth as global warming continues to dry up the planet. She preaches preparation for the goal of using survival skills and knowledge acquired here on Earth, armed with a religio-philosophy of adaptability to change, to survive the changes that occur on Earth by moving into the beyond of outer space. At the end of *Talents* it is revealed that, while she did not expect that she would live to see the day when humans would actually colonize another planet, her followers succeed in being the first to settle colonies on the moon.

The references to African spiritual heritage are residual within the *Parables*, representative of the ways in which histories and heritages can be forgotten and phased out, yet symbolically revived and/or invoked to infuse meaning in contemporary situations. This is the way in which the African elements of Olamina’s religious philosophy appear to be working in the text. Olamina’s full name is Lauren Oya Olamina; the middle name, Oya, is the Yoruban orixa/goddess of change and transformation, while the Yoruban surname Olamina that was adopted by her grandfather

during the 1960s (Sower 206) means “this is my wealth.” According to Teresa Washington, Africana women continue to possess the power of the word to be manifested into works through the spiritual forces of Oro and Aje, even without access to or knowledge of specific Yoruba names and terminology (63). Awo Fatunmbi explains Oro and Aje thusly: "Oro is the manifestation of the power of the word. Aje is the force that gives the power of the word the intensity needed to effect change" (38). These complementary forces are given extra power when Oya, the deity of Transformation, is invoked, for "Oya manifests in breath, which is essential for life and for fueling divine utterances" (Washington 63). Aje "signifies both a [spiritual] power and the human beings who wield it" (59). The spiritual origin is represented in Oodua, mother of the orixas and all living things, and the human manifestations of Aje are daughters of Oodua, who "possess spiritual vision, the power to make desires realities, ownership of flora and fauna, socio-political authority, and power of the word" (59). Thus, Olamina appears as a "human Aje," the daughter of Oodua. Her proverb-like verses that espouse Earthseed theology conjure the words that will create literal works—both the texts that constitute the literary product in *The Books of the Living* by which the liberatory actions/works are ultimately generated. As Washington suggests, "when the Word and the Works are holistically imbibed and creativity purposefully applied, the ... community attain(s) the ultimate honor—immortality" (67).

The religious tract, *The Books of the Living*, also signifies upon the ancient Egyptian *The Book of the Dead*, casting the belief system firmly within a survivalist discourse that insists upon hope in the here and now as opposed to focus on life in the hereafter. *The Books of the Living* function as a guide to navigate believers through the

treacherous path of life as it is lived, in opposition to the perilous transition through death. It is an ideology at once affirming of hope and caustically realistic, shaped by the dynamic social, political and economic forces that inform the reality of that society's daily existence.

In the *Parables*, the symbolic image representative of the creation and sharing of liberatory knowledge is iconized in the notion of “seeding” –seeding communities, seeding knowledge of the Earthseed religion. It encapsulates the necessity of taking that which is given and persisting in making it fruitful far beyond its meager origins, as articulated in the actual Biblical parable, Luke 8:5-8, for which the text is named. Olamina charges that the ultimate destiny for Earthseed is to scatter among the stars. This projection of the future of humans back into the cosmos functions as a kind of homegoing for humanity in an interesting reversal of the Dogon creation story that argues that humans (their tribe in particular) come from the stars. The word that the Dogon people of Mali use for the originary essence that exploded in a big bang to create our universe is “kize uze” (the tiniest of things) and is characterized as a tiny seed floating through empty space before the creation of the Milky Way, and from which all life eventually evolves (Azuonye, 48). In *Talents*, it is revealed that adherents to the Earthseed religion have, indeed, succeeded in establishing the first colonies on the moon. The success of this endeavor signals the expansion of Lauren's original “survivalist ethic” into an actualization of ultimate transcendence. Even though she is unable to go with them to colonize the Moon, she witnesses the fulfillment of the destiny: "I know what I've done. I have not given them heaven, but I've helped to give themselves the heavens. I can't give

them individual immortality, but I've helped them to give our species its only chance at immortality. I've helped them to the next stage of growth" (Talents 444).

As a black female founder of a liberatory theology and practice, Olamina represents the creative force in the tradition of African American female spiritual leaders whose goal is to engender liberatory praxis for the community. Earthseed emblemizes the kind of creation of knowledge Patricia Hill Collins talks about when she suggests that “the significance of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology may lie in its enrichment of our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that enables them to resist oppression” (757). For if Olamina’s religious discourse of Earthseed can be read as an expression of faith (located in the ability of people to transform their circumstances through attention to change and forethought) and her sharing that faith with others to build community as an expression of hope that trouble will not last always, then I want to suggest that hope lay at the foundation of Olamina’s hybrid spiritual epistemology that compels her to share the “good news” with other people, demonstrating a black feminist—and spiritual—concern for the liberation of entire communities. The character of Olamina emblemizes Stephanie Mitchem's assertion that “black women begin religious explorations... in daily life, not in exercises in theory or doctrine” (47). In the *Parables*, life is at once a lived theory/doctrine that is constantly tested in the action of daily living and altered according to the demands of survival.

### **Theorizing Subjective Difference through Lauren Oya Olamina**

Olamina's status as a spiritual leader appears almost inevitable, given the force of African spiritual resonances influencing her religious sensibilities. Yet, the material forces shaping her identity are equally important in influencing how she constructs her



spiritual ideology. Olamina embodies the convergence of multiple aspects of liminal identity interacting in dynamic ways to cope with the social ills plaguing the California and U.S. communities. The interplay of fluctuating class status, fluid gender performance, and situational disability within the raced body of Olamina becomes a site for the negotiation of survival.

Within the text, class, gender, and (dis)ability are tenuous and mutable statuses. Olamina's father is a college professor whose vocation creates a degree of privilege in maintaining a home in a society where the majority of people have become "street poor" due to the outrageous costs of maintaining a home. As social conditions have worsened, communities have built walls around their neighborhoods—Olamina's neighborhood is a cul-de-sac of eight to ten families—to keep out the disaffected members of society, who are poor and desperate—a dangerous combination, as Olamina observes on one of her few trips outside of the wall (Sower 9). Their walled-in cul-de-sac represents not only a site of insulation against the dangerous and desperate outsiders; it also becomes a trap into which they wall themselves, setting themselves up as visible targets as they struggle to keep possession of their rapidly dwindling material wealth. When the last Window Wall—a futuristic television that provides the sole source of what is happening in the world beyond their cul-de-sac—burns out, no one has enough money to purchase another one, and their connection to the events in the outside world is almost completely cut off, placing them in a position of increased isolation. The insularity of their walled-in neighborhood does little to foster trust amongst neighbors within the community; neighbors regard each other with guarded dependence. The tenuous nature of these individuals' class status is revealed when the drug addicts, imagining themselves as

crusaders for the poor against a "rich" oppressive elite symbolized by the enclaves of walled communities, break down the walls of the cul-de-sac, set the homes on fire, and kill the members of the community. The majority of the community members have been in denial about the tenuous level of security provided by the walls and, hence, were unprepared for such an attack. Nearly all of the community members perish in the assault. Olamina, however, has been preparing and training for this day for several years; never convinced that the walls could protect them from the dangers beyond, she has prepared emergency packs and practiced escape routes and strategies. Her attempts to help others prepare for such a day were met with fear and suspicion; so when what Olamina knows will be inevitable occurs—the destruction of the wall and their way of life—her plan to survive works, and she is able to help the few other survivors regroup and move forward with a course of action.

Thus, class status based on material wealth is a tenuous status at best. In a matter of hours, a lifetime committed to protection of homes and material goods is destroyed and the survivors are reduced from middle class (rich by the street-poor's perspective) status to being street-poor themselves. However, because Olamina has had the foresight to plan for some provisions to start over and is able to convince the other survivors to stay together, they are in a better position than those long-time homeless and street-poor whose desperation and poverty isolates them from each other.

### *Fluid Gender Performance*

Once on the streets, Olamina, an unflinching realist, understands the risks and dangers associated with perceptions of weakness. Women are targets, vulnerable to attacks by bands of thugs. In order to better negotiate her own survival and well-being in

addition to those with whom she travels, she dresses and performs as a man on the streets. Olamina is a tall, young woman who happens to be somewhat androgynous in appearance if she chooses. She uses this to her advantage while on the streets; as masses of homeless people have taken over the highways, the street poor either huddle where they are, scavenging what opportunity, risk-taking—and for some, criminal acts—will permit. She is joined by Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, former neighbors from the burned Robledo neighborhood. Olamina's decision to travel as a man is confirmed as a wise decision when, early on, two marauders approach the camp, appearing interested in raping Zahra even in spite of the fact that she is apparently accompanied by two men. They retreat when Olamina displays her gun.

The fact that Olamina must cross-dress as a survival strategy on the road illuminates the increasing oppressive and repressive attitudes towards women during times of societal disintegration. As the picture of post-apocalyptic U.S. continues to develop in *Talents*, violence against women becomes increasingly common: some women have had their tongues cut out; many others are subject to rape and other sexual abuse as slavery is re-instituted. Oppression against women is articulated as one of the ways in which history repeats itself during times of large scale social crisis, and illuminates the extraordinary resiliency with which Olamina and the community she and her companions eventually found resist the hegemony of the popular religio-political rhetoric.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See the research on the abuses against women during times of war and conflict: Goldstein's *War and Gender*, Lentin's *Gender and Catastrophe*, Barstow's *War's Dirty Secret*, Frederick's *Rape: Weapon of Terror*, and Amnesty International's publication *Lives Blown Apart* among others.

*Situational (Dis)Ability and the Raced Body*

While traveling on the road, Olamina is fully aware that any appearance of weakness or vulnerability will set her and her fellow travelers up as easy prey. As such, markers of difference that attract attention become liabilities, if not disabilities, on the open road. Being female, appearing to have newer clothing or possessions, and possessing a disability are all identity markers that would draw unwanted attention from the reckless and selfish bands of robbers and thieves that prey on those who appear less able to defend themselves. Intensifying this problematic is the fact that Olamina has a psychosomatic illness, hyperempathy syndrome. Hyperempathy syndrome is a psychological impairment wherein the affected person experiences another person's extreme emotions—pain or pleasure—as if they were her own. Upon seeing one of her fellow travelers shot in the leg, for example, Olamina feels the pain as if she, herself were shot and collapses to the ground in debilitating pain. While she lived within the shielded space of the walled-in cul-de-sac, Olamina was able to manage her impairment by limiting exposure to triggers for her condition. However, out on the streets and in the context of the quasi-apocalyptic culture where murder, rape and violence are daily occurrences, her impairment has the potential to escalate into disability with the wild randomness of violence characteristic of life on the street, a situation that could cost her life as well as those with whom she travels because of her inability to defend herself or others during these episodes. In order to survive, she understands her impairment as a vulnerability that must remain hidden and protected, even from her fellow travelers for a period of time, in order to survive. However, she later comes to view this impairment as a

potentially transformative condition, engendering possibility for more humane social interactions during such treacherous times. She asks,

'But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them' (Sower 102).

Her condition is psychosomatic, erasing the boundaries between the experience of "imagined" and "real" pain; after all, delusional pain is just as agonizing as "real" pain. In fact, it is likely that Olamina's condition functions as one of the major generative forces enabling her social vision and religious praxis. "Sharers," as people possessing this impairment are called, have the ability to experience both the pleasure and the pain of other people; however, given the misery and blight characteristic of social conditions during the time of "the Pox," the condition becomes more of a disability as society is more violent and sadistic than pleasurable and positive. Sharers are exploited, abused, and more readily captured into slavery if they are discovered to be hyperempaths, which is why concealment becomes the survival strategy for most. Because she is aware of how difficult it is for someone with her condition to survive under the current social conditions, she develops a belief system that channels the energies of people around her into creative, positive productivity.

Olamina possesses the common sense, forethought, and ability to either transform or conceal these identity markers to appear less vulnerable. However, race is the only aspect of her identity that is not manipulable; whereas she can "pass" as a man, as poorer than she actually is, and as fully abled, there is no possibility of "passing" as anything other than Black. And while it appears that race is not particularly limiting for her from

an individual standpoint, it becomes problematic in the context of the social dynamic. Her group's physical characteristics potentially attract unwanted attention because they are a racially mixed band traveling together. Zahra, who was raised homeless and then purchased by one of the cul-de-sac community members as a third wife, possesses important knowledge from her previous life on the streets on how to survive "outside" the wall. When discussing plans to travel north with Harry, their white companion, she points out "mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight..." (Sower 153). Widespread poverty and desperation exacerbates already poor race relations, and the group must create trust amongst themselves and select newcomers to increase their numbers and strengthen their chances of survival.

The presence of women, racial diversity, and later, the presence of babies and children, along with the size of the group, have a two-pronged effect: while on the one hand, there is strength in numbers with more people to share the responsibility of keeping watch while the others sleep, on the other hand the group calls attention to itself and potential attack; such a large group large is likely to have considerable resources amongst the numbers of them, making an attack well worth consideration. But, as Olamina repeats throughout the text, from the time of preparation within the walls of the cul-de-sac until they reach what will become the community of Acorn, she intends to survive. Her manipulation of those aspects of identity that are mutable and transformation of that which is not—i.e., racial diversity—into a source of strength characterizes an ethic of survival based on necessity, pragmatism, and cautious optimism.

## Re-Imagining the Beloved Community

Within the *Parables*, home becomes a floating signifier in tense times. The attempts to establish and re-establish community reveal the limitations of the idea of community established on the basis of national association or spatial located-ness. Such efforts fail to provide a vision flexible enough to accommodate difference and ensure survival of all members. Indeed, the nation and state of which Olamina and Acorn are ostensibly a part casts its own citizens outside of the discursive boundaries of what it means to be an American. California has become a vast urban wasteland; very few people own homes, and the dwindling middle class is swiftly joining the ranks of the street poor as their homes become the object of attack by drug-addicted arsons. In a context where homelessness is the norm, and social conditions would seem to defy any opportunity for improvement, Olamina and her companions must establish a new sense of community as well as a new code of ethics in order to survive.<sup>56</sup>

The nation as a whole has been destabilized and undergone a massive geographic shift due to the near simultaneous occurrence/convergence of environmental, economic, and social crises (Talents 8). Alaska eventually declares independence from the U.S.(Talents 57); the remaining states function more as autonomous nation-states rather than as part of the larger commonwealth, so California is left in a state of misery based on its own geographic and economic crises. The states of Oregon and Washington have closed their borders to the "California trash" drifting north. Parts of the country are hit

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<sup>56</sup> Numerous scholars have addressed Butler's vision of community in the *Parables*. See Madhu Dubey's "Folk and Urban Communities in African-American Women's Fiction," Patricia Melzer's "All That You Touch You Change" and Ruth Salvaggio's "Octavia Butler and the Black Science Fiction Heroine."

with plagues of their own: the South, blasted by tornadoes, the Northeast with a measles epidemic, and use of the arson-inducing drug has spread to the Midwest. Politicians become elected by disseminating lies and false hope based on the restoration of the country to its former glory of the twentieth century through the tenets of a new fundamentalist church called Christian America. When the founder of the Christian America church, Andrew Steele Jarret, is elected President, his vision of what it means to be "American" galvanizes fascism and bigotry into full-blown domestic terrorism. His sermons institute an extremely narrow vision of what it means to be an American and casts those who are alien to that vision as the sources for the nation's problems:

'There was a time, Christian America, when our country ruled the world," he said. "America was God's country and we were God's people and God took care of his own. Now look at us. Who are we? What are we? What foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become?

'Are we Christian? Are we? Can our country be just a little bit Christian and a little bit Buddhist, maybe?... How about a little bit Christian and little bit Moslem? Or perhaps we can be a little bit Christian and a little bit pagan cultist?'

And then he thundered, 'We are God's people or we are filth! We are God's people or we are nothing! We are God's people! God's people! Oh my God, my God, why have we forsaken thee? Why have we allowed ourselves to be seduced and betrayed by these allies of Satan, by these heathen purveyors of false and unchristian doctrines? These people... these pagans are not only wrong. They're dangerous... They kill us! They rouse the righteous anger of God against us for our misguided generosity to them. They are the natural destroyers of our country. ..

'And in the face of all that, what are we to them? What must we do to protect ourselves and our children? What can we do to regain our stolen nation?' (Talents, 95-96).

This doctrine incites the organization of vigilante groups calling themselves the Christian Crusaders, who wear updated Klansmen-like attire—black tunics with white crosses emblazoned on the front. Members of this group eventually enslave Olamina's community and transform it into a "Christian reeducation camp." Their entrapment in



their own community of Acorn echoes the burning of Olamina's first home/community and highlights the reductive nature of closed communities.

In Olamina's original home community, the walled-in cul-de-sac possesses the dual function of both protecting the small landed community from desperate outsiders and of isolating the community, setting them up as targets. To the homeless living outside the wall, the community appears wealthy, although, as the story is told from the perspective of Olamina as a resident within the wall, that middle class status was becoming increasingly tenuous before the attack that destroyed the community. When the owner of a home dies, family members from other communities would move in to help make ends meet, creating more instances of extended kinship networks as a family unit rather than the traditional 'normative' nuclear family. The common goal of protecting their families and material goods creates a more closely knit community within the neighborhood based on a vested and mutual interest in cooperating for the sake of survival. But Olamina is ambivalent about her feelings because of the impending sense of doom as social conditions continue to deteriorate. She says, "God, I hate this place. I mean, I love it. It's home. These are my people. But I hate it. It's like an island surrounded by sharks—except that sharks don't bother you unless you go in the water. But our land sharks are on their way in. It's just a matter of how long it takes for them to get hungry enough" (Sower 44). When the sharks find their way in, the result is total destruction. Olamina's community is completely destroyed along with just about everyone in it. Within minutes of the wall being broken down, fires are set, the community members are killed, and the street poor arrive to scavenge anything useful for their own survival.

For the survivors of the attack, Olamina, Harry and Zahra, the sudden shift from landed protection to street poor homelessness catalyzes the dispersal that takes place throughout the latter portion of the text. The highway is an open road where the impoverished masses either drift aimlessly or move towards the promised lands of Alaska and Canada, where it is rumored that there are jobs that pay hard currency. The group's goal is to head north, the hope of reaching someplace with better living and working conditions sustaining their efforts. And while the open road is the most perilous and treacherous space in apocalyptic California, it is also the only space where the possibility to realize the hope/dream of something better might be realized. The journey motif so characteristic of much of science fiction is infused here with Butler's vision of a society wherein travel is simultaneously a liberating experience as well as a potentially enslaving one. People on the streets are subject to all sorts of perils, including being attacked and sold into slavery or indentured servitude. Thus, the journey becomes more the flight of fugitives not unlike the conditions of a civil war.

As part of the street poor walking the highways trying to find a way and a place to make a home, Olamina gradually gathers people to her and begins to form the Earthseed community that will become the establishment of Acorn. During this process, Olamina meets Taylor Bankole, a physician who she will eventually marry and who possesses land in northern California. Bankole's land provides the space where the first attempt to rebuild a community will begin. Acorn, the name of this new community, references the generative force of the religion, the possibility of starting over from something small that will grow into a sturdy, sustaining force. They settle on Bankole's land and begin to create a home for themselves where they can survive the times. Isolated from the

highway and distant from several other small communities, they are free to practice as they believe even as the leadership of the country becomes increasingly fascist.

Olamina's theology enables the group to move beyond the level of survival at which most street poor subsist. But even as the Earthseed religion grows, Olamina's initial plan of establishing the Acorn community in one fixed location actually renders them vulnerable to attack, oppression and tyranny. The tragic period of time where members of the Acorn community are accused of being occultists and are enslaved on their own land intensifies the reflective aspect of God as Change and demands that Olamina learn the lesson and adapt if she, her community members, and the religion itself are to be true to its ideology and survive. The result of reflection on that experience is that Olamina rethinks her concept of community and locale. Rather than trying to build a literal city of believers who are easily targeted and potentially destroyed, she begins to "seed" knowledge of Earthseed as an itinerant preacher, taking the word and her *Books of the Living* to people where they are.

Thus, just as the walled-in cul-de-sac where Olamina grew up provided a degree of protection that simultaneously framed them as targets, so Acorn suffers similar problems. Already regarded as operating outside the boundaries of normativity, Acorn becomes an iconic target for fundamentalist zealots, just as their Robledo cul-de-sac represented the oppressive rich elite for the drug-addicted arsons and street poor. Olamina had hoped that Acorn will become a beacon of hope on the hill, serving as the basis for the expansion of her religion and cooperative values that will enable more people to survive and thrive during the harshness of the times (Talents 77). The community's moderate isolation in the hills serves as their protection rather than walls,

and their increasing numbers enable a sense of community amongst members that is strengthened further by the shared religious/belief system of Earthseed. They plant gardens from which they grow produce to feed themselves and to trade/barter with neighboring communities; they remain industrious by building humble cabins where each family can live. Their lives are largely feudal-like, but they are eventually able to produce better than subsistence levels of production. But one difference between Olamina's Robledo cul-de-sac and Acorn, however, is that Acorn is situated near other small communities similar to their own and who also are working to move a bit beyond mere survival. However, suspicion of strangers remains strong, and the Acorn community has not been established long enough to fully win the trust of their longer-established neighbors. Although they have made gestures of neighborliness that have begun to establish them as trustworthy people, they are still regarded with suspicion because of their difference—a racially mixed community of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Whites who believe in some strange religion that nobody has ever heard of. Again, their difference renders them vulnerable.

In the context of an increasingly fascist state, Acorn is characterized by the supposedly normative Christian crusaders installed in office as a dangerous pagan cult whose heathen values and behaviors threaten the fabric of American society. The Acorn community's difference—racially diverse, ideologically different—positions them as scapegoats for America's social ills. After the election of the Christian fundamentalist Andrew Steele Jarret to the Presidency, followers of his Christian America church, armed with military grade tanks and weapons, launch an attack on Acorn, enslaving the

community and turning it into a Christian re-education camp where vagrants and other “threats to the American way of life” are enslaved.

The home and community that Olamina and her companions were attempting to build is taken from them and turned against them; their captors move into their homes and crowd the community members into the school house, where men and women are separated from one another. Their children are taken away and placed with Christian America households to be raised properly. For seventeen months, they are forced to work for their captors while being re-educated by their Christian America "teachers" who, ironically, experience a perverse pleasure from abusing and raping their charges. During this time, inmates from other neighboring communities are brought to Camp Christian as well, exacerbating the strife and general poor conditions amongst the captives. Control is maintained through the use of electronic collars, which administer electric shocks of pain for “insubordinate” behavior and which are also capable of administering pleasurable stimulation to reward “cooperative” behavior. These are the tools of modern-day slavery coupled with the methods of antebellum slavery. When a thunderstorm disables the collars/control devices, the captives seize the opportunity to destroy their captors and start over:

'We burned Acorn. No. No, we burned Camp Christian. We burned Camp Christian so that it couldn't be used as Camp Christian anymore...

So, once more, we watched our homes burn. We went into the hills, separating from the last of the other inmates... From the hills, for a time, we watched. Most of us had seen our homes burn before, but we had not been the ones to set the fires. This time, though, it's too late for fire to be the destroyer that we remembered. The things that we had created and loved had already been destroyed. This time, the fires only cleansed.'  
(Talents 285-286).

In spite of the repeated destruction of home spaces detailed within the *Parables*, such attacks fail to destroy a sense of community. The drive towards community is generated out of necessity with the first community burning in Robledo—the few remaining living must band together if they wish to survive. When the second burning occurs in Acorn, the survivors choose to regroup and reassess their understanding of community and to alter their approach to it in order to enable the survival and thriving of their community in light of the lessons learned over the last year and a half. They must scatter if they as individuals and if Earthseed as a religious doctrine are to survive. This diffusion of the community postulates dispersal/diaspora as a difficult and painful yet necessary step in the process of re-envisioning the role, function, and image of community while simultaneously positioning diaspora as a liberatory model. If all of the followers of Earthseed remain together, they run the risk of both their physical bodies and the Earthseed ideology being destroyed. Survival lies in scattering, in spreading out in as many areas as possible and of each member sharing the beliefs with whoever they are able to reach. This method appears to work; the followers of Earthseed live dispersed amongst other communities, where people come to know and trust them for themselves, while Olamina takes on the role of an itinerant preacher, traveling from place to place and converting families and households one by one before moving on to the next place. The result is an even more diverse, socio-economically speaking, devoted following, which has the added benefit of bringing particular skills and expertise to the movement and the fulfillment of the destiny. Thus, the proliferation of the religion/ideology becomes increasingly ubiquitous the more decentralized Olamina's sense of community becomes. This outcome suggests that transformative ideology must become the business of not

merely the "oppressed" from whom the desire for transformation and positive change originates, but the responsibility of all, even those in or with power.

### **Beyond the Utopia/Dystopia Binary: Ectopia as Liminal Community**

The centrality of community within the *Parables* bears directly upon assessment of it as a genre. Critics' analyses of the *Parables* focus on the notion of utopia/dystopia, a concept popularly invoked when discussing speculative and science fiction. The texts have generated a dialogue surrounding classification of the texts, with analyses struggling to articulate, how, exactly, Butler's texts fit within utopian discourse. Patricia Melzer suggests that Butler's "utopian communities problematize the possibility of an 'ideal community' and its vulnerabilities and problems" (2) while Ruth Salvaggio suggests that Butler's fictive world is "not the typical feminist utopia, but a flawed world in which racially and sexually oppressed individuals negotiate their way through a variety of personal and societal barriers" (78). Jim Miller agrees, suggesting that "Butler's work...exists within the tradition of feminist utopian writing and, at the same time, seeks to contest it" (337). Suggesting that Butler's works more closely resemble dystopia, rather than utopia, he clings to the notion of utopia to interpret the text: "any form of literature that seeks to help us see things anew is driven by a utopian impulse—even if the work in question is dystopian" (337). Jennifer Burwell argues for a dialectic between the concepts of utopia and dystopia, stating "In critical utopias, a structural and ideological permeability begins to characterize the boundary between utopia and dystopia: 'disutopian' moments of dissatisfaction and conflict now occur with the utopian society, and female protagonists move back and forth between dystopian and utopian social space, both altering and being altered by their social environment" (89). She goes on to

argue, "Although in their formal structure they reproduce many of the logics of utopian collectivity, Butler's communities are by no means ideal, and they are organized explicitly to foreground the differences among their members while at the same time denaturalizing the differences between communities" (129-130).

This effort to categorize Butler's *Parables* highlights the "striking hybridity" that "defies easy genre categorization and makes [utopian/dystopian science fiction narratives] effective tools" (Miller 337). The operative force behind the concept of utopia, however, ultimately lies in the spirit of striving associated with the achievement of better communities, and not necessarily an expectation of its actual achievement. This is where utopia, and its dialectical opposite, critical dystopia, fail to adequately engage Butler's texts. As Miller suggests, "Butler does not offer a full-blown utopian 'blueprint' in her work, but rather a post-apocalyptic hoping informed by the lessons of the past" (336). Thus, in *Parables*, the ultimate goal of achievement is not utopia, but what I call *ectopia*, the location of community outside of and/or beyond the limits of discursively stagnant renderings of community. Butler consistently foregrounds the complex nature of community-building with Acorn functioning as the experimental model, and interrogates the eternal questions and conditions of difference and hierarchy as it plays into the articulation of these inevitably imperfect places inhabited by imperfect humans. However, rather than attempting to achieve the articulation of a place/community that embraces difference as its *raison d'être* or proposes isolationism as the private reserve of a select few, it appears that Butler's generic praxis highlights the liberatory effects of achieving community that is *out of place*—i.e., not confined by traditional borders nor bound by the limits of space. The eventual diffusiveness of Earthseed ideology as it is



articulated in *Talents* represents one aspect of the saving grace of the ectopic: it is everywhere and nowhere at once, in the liminal space between physical locatedness *out in space* and in its ideological ubiquity, the ultimate achievement of theory into praxis. Ectopia, then, would seem to naturalize strangeness (i.e, alien-ness, the sense of being out of place in society, and in one's own body as with Lauren's hyperempathy) as part of change, hence part of God, part of everything and everyone. If God is Change, perpetually shifting yet malleable, ectopia becomes its liminal home, shifting and reshaping the articulation of community as Change dictates.

Octavia Butler's *Parables* bring the trope of the "alien" full circle. If Aline França's text posits the origin of black folk from the stars, then Butler's protagonist's destiny for her followers to return to those very same stars constitutes a return home, marking the passage of a distinctive and radically different "Other"—primarily different ideologically—on a journey through a land that has become strange and foreign even to its inhabitants, but who nonetheless is challenged to find a way to create a home space during her stay there. Butler's novels prior to the *Parables* can be characterized as explorations in extreme cognitive estrangement of the mind and body engendered by genetically mutated humans as in the *Patternmaster* series and non-humanoid aliens from other worlds as in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, both of which place normative human beings in submissive roles in relation to generally mentally superior aliens and mutants. The *Parables*, however, move the focus closer to home to examine the alienation of what can be characterized as the "aliens" within American culture: all those people who are a part of American society, who, it is increasingly shown, bear next to no significant difference from a biological standpoint from the mainstream, normative, White Anglo-Saxon

Protestant male model of the American citizen, but who are somehow always considered alien on the basis of physical—and frequently ideological—difference.<sup>57</sup> In the futuristic setting of the *Parables*, difference is posited as primarily ideological, yet complicated by the exigencies of race, gender, class, and (dis)ability through the character of Olamina. The religion that she develops constitutes an ideological estrangement from the broader American community, and because the community that she gathers together is racially diverse, its ideological difference becomes partially defined by its somatic difference. Thus, in the futuristic context created by Butler, any ideological difference translates into a corporeal classification by which ascribers are identified and subsequently persecuted. The grounds upon which the ideological differences are generated are spiritual/religious in nature, and constitute the liberation theology by which masses ultimately are enabled to survive and thrive in spite of the sense of doom overshadowing the times. The *Parables* ultimately examine the survival strategies of the disfranchised, engaging the various hegemonic forces shaping power relations in contemporary U.S. culture and speculating on the potential solutions to problems and policies should they continue on their current trajectory. Character subjectivity, diasporic space, and spiritual epistemology converge to illuminate new ways of relating across difference, of negotiating collective survival and exercising agency in spite of social conditions that would deny hopeful strivings. Indeed, renewed faith and striving hopefulness galvanized by an undergirding ethics based on diversity, inclusion, adaptability, and practicality

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<sup>57</sup> African Americans have historically struggled to establish their humanity in response to dominant social narratives that have cast them legalistically and ideologically, variously, as object, property, and animal on the premise of their physical (racialized) difference. Thus, the body becomes a site of contest over discourses on biologized conceptions of difference and Otherness, particularly in Butler's texts that move through slavery and colonial eras.

comprise the foundation of Earthseed, allowing its adherents not only to survive, but to thrive. One solution out of many.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

*“I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me to de land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land.”*

~Harriet Tubman, describing the first time she set foot on land where she was not a slave.<sup>58</sup>

The epigraph that opens the concluding section of this project speaks to the fundamental concern that the literature of speculation provides for black folk in the Americas. It raises the question of the on-going struggle for liberation as well as the agency with which black female predecessors have acted to achieve that liberation. But that action simultaneously houses an estranging tension for those individuals who achieve their goal of personal liberation. For, the alienation that Harriet Tubman experiences upon entering the “promised land” of freedom, alone and without community to either welcome or support her passage and entry, bespeaks the alienation with which these black women writers enter the world of speculative fiction. We see in the metaphor a lonely journey galvanized by those same oppressive processes that negate the building of community. In slavery, the knowledge that a strong sense of community among the enslaved would undoubtedly incite resistance stood as the foremost motivation for slave owners to devise “divide and conquer” strategies that kept slaves isolated and alienated

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<sup>58</sup> Quote and explanatory phrasing taken from Uppinder Mehan’s concluding thoughts in the edited anthology of postcolonial science fiction and fantasy, *So Long Been Dreaming*.

from one another. In the writing of speculative fiction, black women writers understand, traditionally, that their “backwards and primitive” ways of understanding the world are doomed to extinction, and certainly have no place in the future. Indeed, the paucity of black women writing speculative fiction bespeaks an alienation akin to the lone slave escaped to the promised land. Thus, the building of “community,” or the creation of *communitas*, through self-liberation and community liberation, bridges the historical and literary action. Central to Tubman’s work—the repeated return to slave territory to bring countless others to the land of freedom—was the understanding that the freedom of the individual was nothing if countless others remained enslaved. Similarly, in the speculative works of these black women writers we can identify something of a rescue mission. The individual is accountable to the community; the liberation of one is nothing without the liberation of all. This striving for the freedom of the collective undergirds the spirit of black feminist activism that recurs throughout the analyses of these texts.

This consideration of Harriet Tubman and her liberation activism is particularly fitting for this project for a number of reasons. Primary among them are the shared social and historical condition of slavery experienced by black folk in the Americas, and the ongoing struggle to achieve liberation on both personal and communal levels that continues to drive black resistance across formerly slave cultures. But just as significant is the fact that Tubman’s activism was spurred by her dreams and visions of her fate if she remained a slave and of the liberated future that lay just beyond her reach (Bradford 16). Further, Tubman’s dreams and visions suggest an unavoidable spiritual “calling” in her role as liberator of black slaves, just as the protagonists within these texts must embrace their roles as spiritual leaders. She stands as the historical foremother to the

protagonists in these speculative texts who dream a liberated future for all of humankind and who dare to take on the mantle of leadership.

The texts examined throughout this project are speculative works that meditate on the impact of historical events to suggest how we might begin to change the future—that ultimately engages the liminality of certain black women’s oppositional practices that continue unheeded and unacknowledged as “acceptably sayable” within the academy. Just as Harriet Tubman’s dreams and visions—and the role they played in her liberation activism—were censored due to the biographer Sarah Bradford’s desire “not to insert anything which, with any, might bring discredit upon the story” (Bradford 56), so it is with which the African-based spiritual framings of black women’s speculative fictions might be regarded without an interpretive frame that seeks to explicitly engage such epistemologies. This process therefore demands the reclamation of black female subjectivity in their representation as spiritual leaders. Further, this spiritual leadership finds its peculiar force in the spiritual legacy and epistemology of largely Yoruba-based religious traditions that always accepted women as spiritual leaders on the African continent. Thus, the African-based spiritual practices undergirding the activist practices of black women provides an oppositional paradigm to the purely Christocentric religious liberatory discourses that frequently delimit the leadership roles of women and which black men have historically used to suppress the leadership potential of black women. Across cultures, then, black women have been able to locate their spiritual leadership potential through African-derived epistemologies. Black diasporic space is a liminal space that at once indicates the necessary carving out of protected spaces wherein these oppositional practices can occur, and the shift from that space to engagement with the

broader cultural problems impeding liberatory praxis. All of these elements converge in black women's speculative fictions, manifesting the text as words and the text as works, that is, as both ideology and action, and reveals multiply liminal discourse as both a theory and a practice.

Multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive frame that accounts for all of the aforementioned elements within black women's speculative fictions integrates liberation theory with liberation practice. This engagement with black women's speculative fictions illuminates another position of liminality that black women writers assume in order to critique the various iterations of hegemony in society. That dimension is the very positioning of liberation theory in relation to liberatory practice. In developing the notion of multiply liminal discourse as a theoretical framework by which Black women's speculative fictions can be analyzed, I have entered into dubious battle<sup>59</sup> with the seemingly Manichean distinctions between theory and its place in the interpretation of black women's texts. Many Black women critics' <sup>60</sup> presumed resistance to hegemonic institutional practices is articulated as a resistance to theory, reflecting the understanding of theory "as an ideological category associated with the politically dominant" (McDowell 569), and further articulated as the ostensible distinction between the largely material concerns of the majority of black feminist critics over the seemingly purely ideological exercises of theory. As Deborah McDowell observes, "the assignment so far of black women to the 'serious political' as opposed to the 'high theoretical' is an oversimplified taxonomic distinction based primarily on the convenience of the

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<sup>59</sup> Reference to the Joyce-Gates-Baker 1987 *New Literary History* debate on the purpose and function of literary theory and its relation to "the masses."

<sup>60</sup> The seminal article for this issue is Barbara Christian's 1987 article "The Race for Theory."

privileged few" (572-573). She further asserts, "the critical language of black women is represented, with few exceptions, as outside the bounds of the acceptably sayable and is heard primarily as an illicit and non-critical variety of critical discourse defined in opposition to theory" (568). Rather than perpetuate those distinctions, I engage McDowell's challenge to "resist the theory/practice dichotomy, which is too broad, abbreviated, and compromised by hedging definitions to capture the range and diversity of contemporary critical projects" (566) through the integrative model offered by multiply liminal discourse.

Thus, this project stems less from a desire to conform to exteriorly imposed standards of high theoretical rigor than it does from an effort to generate a theoretical system that derives specifically from the textual articulations of black women writers. What multiply liminal discourse offers as a method of analysis is a ritual zone or conjure space<sup>61</sup> wherein the theoretical structures and the activist intentions of black women's speculative textual production "work" on each other in the creation of visionary politics—what Teresa Washington identifies as *Àjê*, that spiritual/political "point around which many cultural realities and spiritual and historical forms and figures originate, swirl, and converge... stand[ing] at the center of the Africana worldview" (273). If "we are always embroiled with theory," then let us attend to the ways in which black women's theorizations, be they folk or Foucauldian, enable liberatory political praxis (Baker 1).

Black women's rendering of speculative fiction is, above all else, an enabling literary practice that demands attention to the tides of change ever present within

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<sup>61</sup> This reference is to Baker's notion of conjure spaces as building places for black women's "expressivity."



communities and requires not only change *envisioned*, but change *engendered* towards a future that engages the liberation of all people, without recourse to the hierarchical and hegemonic structures and practices. By explicitly engaging that which is regarded as "outside the bounds of the acceptably sayable," that is, connecting the spiritual worldview to visualization of future worlds, black women speculative writers inscribe a space for black folk in the coming ages, a task that is critical given the historical propensity of science and futuristic fictions to write the black body (and other "marginalized" bodies) out of the future. Black folks' struggle for mere existence and what is more, counterhegemonic agency, is an ongoing historical struggle taken up in the speculative fictions by the black women writers discussed in this project.

Black women's speculative fiction generates multiply liminal discourses that operate on two levels: the authorial and the textual. The authorial functions as a metadiscourse as the black woman speculative author infuses her own textual rules and foundations centered in her own sense of an African-based worldview, creating a conjure space that generates new generic forms. Thus, the speculative text itself is a multiply liminal discourse, the author's practice, or material action that works towards the possibility for espousing and enacting change. Multiply liminal discourse as an interpretive frame elucidates how the protagonist's theorizings operate through these new generic practices. In other words, these new genres function on the textual level, wherein the protagonists' utterances are permitted a space or realm to render their discourse that of the "acceptably sayable" in addition to permitting her to act with liberatory political resistance. Multiply liminal discourse, then, as both the speculative text itself and a theoretical framework for interpretation offers a protected space wherein it operates as a

galvanizing force for change within the action of the text as well as through the speculative text itself.

Thus, throughout these speculative texts, we come to recognize the agency of black female subjectivity as intrinsically bound up with claiming an African-based spirituality, which is critical to the oppositional, liberatory practices engendered within the text. Each of the protagonists, through her role as spiritual leader derived from African-based traditions, engages in acts that galvanize positive social change. The layout of the chapters reveals a process within the dynamics of multiply liminal discourse, revealing a progression that begins with highlighting the significance of black female spiritual leadership through Maria Vitória's status as a conduit between the world of the gods and her community on Earth. It establishes the black female role as central to the survival of her community so that the knowledge her people—African people—possess might not only be preserved, but utilized in service to saving the Earth and its inhabitants. Within the Caribbean diaspora chapter, the characters of Ti-Jeanne and Ella represent the ways in which African-based cultural heritage in diasporic spaces must be cultivated in order to resist the hegemony of “first-world” urban paradigms and to militate against the socially derogating convictions operating in the dominant ideology about black women's African-based spiritual practices. The character of Ti-Jeanne manages to employ African-based spiritual practices to save her community from the combined negative forces of drugs, corruption and neglect while the character of Ella challenges the dismissive and hegemonic academic discourses that would negate her connection to and role within the black community, embracing the black communities' self-theorizations about their own practices. In the context of the United States, the character of Lauren Oya Olamina

represents the challenge of interrogating and integrating new conceptions of hybrid spirituality that, while maintaining an undergirding African spiritual force, malleably expands to respond to the needs dictated by the circumstances. Through a liberation ideology flexibly designed around a survivalist ethics, Olamina's liberatory vision inclusively expands to offer hope for all who share an ideology that embraces not only change, but difference, which, not incidentally, are the quintessential elements invoked within the literature of speculation.

Ultimately, this project reveals the ways in which black women speculative writers envision and imaginatively engender futuristic liberation discourse and practices through their texts and how they enable their own methodologies and ideologies—stemming from “discredited” African-based spiritual epistemologies—to be expressed through the free play of mixed genres. Each text bends the wire of generic discourse to include Africanized ways of understanding future worlds. Aline França challenges both the “myth” of African history and the misappropriation of the black female body in Brazilian science fiction to invoke what I call indigenous history—these African-descended people's historical integration of spiritual and scientific paradigms that shape the present and future worlds within the text. Nalo Hopkinson revises the ways in which technology and specific science fiction icons operate when re-cast from an African spiritual epistemology while Erna Brodber challenges mainstream social scientific methodology and offers the events within the text as a theorization of folk methodologies that embrace possibilities that are only acceptable from an African-based worldview. Finally, Octavia Butler challenges the utopia/dystopia by generating what I call ectopia—a vision of community that operates outside of limiting boundaries, in the realm of

ideological ubiquity to embrace all who care to engage the vision. The genre of speculative fiction provides, for these authors, not only an access point for being alien and speaking difference, but to speak power through their distinctive view of the world. Provision of a space that permits the negotiation of so many aspects of their alien-ness effectively engenders *communitas*. No more do they exist as strangers in a strange land.

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