

# The Unspeakable Speculative, Spoken

Rebecca Wanzo\*

*Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*, Mark C. Jerng. Fordham University Press, 2018.

*Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, Kristen Lillis. The University of Georgia Press, 2017.

*Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Spectacular Fiction*, Sami Schalk. Duke University Press, 2018.

Fantastic fictions are omnipresent in mass media in the twenty-first century and cannot be considered part of a niche audience. As the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) television series demonstrate, audiences have a hunger for these genres. Detractors of superhero narratives and other fantasy texts argue that they romanticize violence, present simplistic moral binaries, and offer limited character development. Such arguments are common reductive critiques of popular fiction as adhering to a set of narrow genre conventions, setting such works apart from so-called literary fiction. The irony, of course, is that fantasy and science fiction writers have imagined spectacularly innovative worlds, although the most radical texts have not traditionally been embraced by Hollywood. Or if they are produced, their more challenging ideological concepts do not make it through the process of adaptation.

Periodically, I read that science fiction writer Octavia Butler's works will soon be adapted for television or film, but she is a perfect example of a writer who offers such ideologically transgressive and complex texts that it is hard to imagine the most interesting concepts of her work remaining intact after adaptation. Take, for example, Butler's last novel, *Fledgling* (2005), which features a 53-year-old vampire who must recover her memories after a brutal assault. She eventually discovers that other vampires attacked her family because she was genetically engineered to be black and more resistant to the sun. Her enemies were concerned about the greater advantages she would have as a vampire who could function better in the daylight. Like Butler's other protagonists, Shori strategizes to gain power through alliances and alternative family structures. She binds people

\*Rebecca Wanzo is Associate Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She is the author of *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (SUNY 2009).

to her through sex and her venom, creating a new community to replace the one she lost. As is characteristic of many of Butler's other works, the novel meditates on biological determinism, discrimination, consent, and power in addressing the question of what it means to be human. Her mechanism for pushing against the commonsense notions of human relationality in this particular text is through the body of her protagonist, who, despite her mental age, appears to be a ten-year old black girl. The depiction of Shori having sex with adults is disturbing, but Butler's representational choices are consistent with her tradition of having her protagonists do the unimaginable and unspeakable in order to survive—no matter how politically transgressive their actions might be.

That feature of her work is one of the reasons there has been a Butler scholarship renaissance in the last decade. In the turn to black speculative fictions, scholars have been compelled by narratives that speak to alternative world orders and reject the traditional call to speak to the realist commitments of African American literature as a counter to the deadly fantasies of white supremacy. So it is not surprising that Butler's *Kindred* (1979) was the gateway novel that introduced many literary scholars to her work and remains the most widely taught. It is the least like science fiction generically because Butler is uninterested in exploring science and the mechanisms of the time travel that propel the plot. As one of the most important neo-slavery novels of the 1970s and 1980s, it spoke to the commitment to represent black life-worlds that were invisible and unarchived.

But the turn, as Isiah Lavender III suggests, toward other works of Butler and other black speculative fictions reflects a recognition that speculative fiction uniquely taps into the creative and fantastic project that black creators must embark upon to imagine worlds outside of black ontology that white supremacy overdetermines. He suggests that Afrofuturism posits that all black cultural production is science fiction, as the black body was made into a technology by slavery and the act of imagining black worlds and futurity in any genre is to participate, in some ways, in the fantastic (187). Black speculative fictions are thus generative sites for recognizing how presence and absence organize stories told about race in the US. Race has often been absent in speculative fictions even as it is allegorical, and when present, it illustrates why the presence of race transforms the very founding premises of a genre and its conventions. But as Butler illustrates, speculative fictions can also be a means of pushing against the limits of what people imagine can and should be represented, challenging the paradigms we use to conceptualize identity. The affective challenge that Shori's black girl body having sex with an adult white man poses is not about getting

*Something unspeakable and unrepresentable is spoken and represented, creating the conditions for something other than what we know or might imagine.*

readers to rethink pedophilia. It impels people to examine what they think they know about identity and power relations from the visible, and how difficult it is to imagine otherwise. Something unspeakable and unrepresentable is spoken and represented, creating the conditions for something other than what we know or might imagine.

Exploring various absences—what is or should not be represented in addition to the unspeakable in terms of racial representations—is the through line of three recent books about race and speculative fictions. Mark C. Jerng’s *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (2018) takes a “playing in the dark” approach to speculative fiction. What Toni Morrison said of canonical American literature is also true of much of the history of speculative fiction: “It only seems that the canon of American literature is ‘naturally’ or ‘inevitably’ ‘white.’ In fact it is studiously so.” For Morrison, many American canonical texts were “not so much transcending politics, or escaping blackness, as they were transforming it into intelligible, accessible, yet artistic modes of discourse” (14). The idea that science fiction is, or should be, identity-politics free was the premise of the “Sad Puppies” and “Rabid Puppies,” a voting campaign for the major science fiction and fantasy prizes from 2013 to 2015 (Waldman, “How Sci-Fi”). Some white writers tried to block the nominations of texts created by people of color that explore issues such as race, feminism, or queerness. For these writers, science fiction should be unmarked by social justice issues like racism. Yet, as Jerng argues, “racial worldmaking” has been at the center of speculative fictions in the US. These genres, he argues, teach us “the salience of race,” namely “when, where, and how race is something to notice” (2).

Jerng deals primarily with white authors, while Kristen Lillvis and Sami Schalk look at black women’s engagement with speculative fictions. Unsurprisingly, Butler is especially important to their texts. Lillvis does not treat black speculative genres or performances as the primary object of her study in *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* (2017). She instead takes one of the primary thematic concerns of black speculative fictions—the posthuman—and rereads some of the most canonical works in the black feminist literary canon through that lens. Deeply indebted to Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* (2014), Lillvis addresses a traditional problem in the turn to discussions of the posthuman and nonhuman, namely, what does it mean to rethink black people’s humanity when they have traditionally been categorized as nonhuman? While some scholars of race, as Zakiyyah Jackson explains, had understandable “ambivalence about the stakes and promise to become ‘post’ modern and ‘post’ human” in 1990s scholarship, a large group of scholars made this critical turn to displace Western humanism (672). Lillvis’s

work is thus illustrative of the success of the posthuman as a paradigm shift in African American literary studies, as she is rereading canonical works traditionally interpreted in a realist mode (often neo-slavery texts) with a theoretical framework traditionally attached to fantastic fictions. By applying a hermeneutic in which the posthuman is important to texts in which the idea of black humanity has traditionally been read as central, Lillvis exhibits the scholarly shift that has occurred in which literary and genre fiction can be considered together. At the same time, her text suggests how difficult it is to really do something substantively new with canonical texts.

If Jerng speaks to how the absence of race in canons of high fantasy illustrates its omnipresence in how we think about futurity, and Lillvis argues for the absence of Western humanism in reading canons of African American women's literature, Schalk speaks to the absence of a framework of disability in African American literature and cultural criticism. In addressing absence—or, perhaps silence—Schalk offers the most paradigm-shifting challenge to what is speakable and unspeakable: the problem of linking blackness with disability and how to reframe our treatment of these categories. Schalk has been part of a recent rise in work on blackness and disability studies. The unspeakable in Schalk is the way in which disability as a metaphor for race is vexed, an unspeakability that is similar to the metaphor between blackness and animals (that people nonetheless frequently use). Schalk's text gives us new language to employ, destabilizing our critical vocabulary and creating theoretical templates for how we approach the black body as a space of expressive possibility—as opposed to one so often foreclosed by the racial scripts attached to it from centuries of racist discourse.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas explains in *The Dark Fantastic* (2019), a monograph about race and YA fantasy, that she grew up believing that “people of color were incidental to the English language fantasy tradition.” But the Dark Other—the monstrous and the “shadows cast by the presence of imagined darkness”—is omnipresent in the fantastic:

[P]eople of color are not incidental to the fantastic. Without Dark Others—either embodied or as shades—fairy tales, science fiction, high fantasy, superhero comics, and graphic novels as we know them simply would not exist . . . any work of the fantastic that is all White signals (if not *screams*) that darkness lingers just beyond the turn of the page, the flicker of a frame, or the click of a thumb. (25)

The Africanist presence became an issue in a 2018 YA fiction controversy when Amélie Wen Zhao's debut novel *Blood Heir*

(2019) was criticized by some YA influencers for an alleged “colorblindness” and lack of awareness of the racial logic of her text (Waldman, “In YA”). One early reader argued that the book produced “a false oppression narrative that equates having legitimately dangerous magical powers that kill people with being an oppressed minority, like a person of color” (qtd. in Alter). The nature of the debate highlights an issue with the history of representation in science fiction and fantasy. The genres are, like most others, traditionally white. But an issue endemic to the speculative is the way in which, as Jerng argues, “racial worldmaking” is foundational to speculative fictions. Slavery is a very common characteristic of fantasy fictions, and obviously slavery existed long before the chattel slavery that was shaped by the African slave trade. But as the genres have developed in the US, certain conventions demonstrate a historical and economic logic that references blackness and chattel slavery. Zhao argued that she was speaking to slavery outside of US contexts, but it was obviously placed with a prominent publisher of the genre because it adhered to conventions common to contemporary YA fantasy. Indeed, Delacorte’s book description showed that they were cognizant of the racial logic readers would bring to the text: it described the world in the novel as a place where “oppression is blind to skin color,” using the alleged absence of race as a referent for the novel’s world-building (qtd. in Waldman, “In YA”).

But the suggestion that fantasy authors are writing in a racial vacuum in which the construction and reception of identity is not shaped by racial logics is disingenuous. The consistent presence of race (often as trace) in speculative genre fictions shows, as Jerng contends, that “genre and race are linked and not separate entities,” and “they work to build, anticipate, and organize the world” (3). Jerng explains that “[m]apping and classifications of peoples and species are” central to “the world-building process” in speculative fictions (106). From J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to George R. R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* series, racial coding is present. When some readers have criticized the whiteness of Martin’s books and television adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, and suggested how race informs the logic of the books, Martin responded that the text is about England’s War of the Roses and his portrayal draws from Greco-Roman slavery in which race does not matter. This defense reveals the heavily racial and gendered logic of fantasy in which a lack of racial diversity or sexism is treated as part of historically real referents when fantasy, by definition, means that the world can be what you make it. As African American fantasy writer N. K. Jemisin argued, people defend the show saying, “Things were just *like* that back then.” To which she replies, “When was that again?? In the good old days of Westeros??” (Jemisin).

Jerng reveals the fallacies of how racial absence is read by brilliantly destabilizing the way we understand allegory working in science fiction and fantasy texts.

Rather than see the allegory as simply referring to something in the real world, Jerng argues that it also works in reverse: “knowledge built into inhabiting the secondary world frames the reader’s knowledge of the primary world” (108). In other words, these texts encourage a “desire for allegory” and cognitive effects that shape meaning-making. Even when race is not explicitly present, the fictions are teaching us how to conceptualize blackness, or the yellow peril, and things that organize our society like economic practices of utility and value. Thus, when Martin says that the referent for slavery is not racialized because of his historical referent, he is ignoring how the knowledge of race shapes readings of *Game of Thrones* and is built into the high fantasy conventions that animate his texts. Fans can insist that the imperialist practice of a white woman freeing darker-skinned slaves in another region and becoming their savior does not have a racial logic, but his resistance (and the resistance of some fans) demonstrates a broader refusal to see the impact race has had on the making of American speculative fictions. On television, the image of the blonde and blue-eyed actress being carried off is highly legible as possessing racial logic. But even sans the hypervisibility of an almost Manichean binary, Jerng would argue that the structural logic of the narrative tells us when and how to notice race.

Jerng is less interested in correlations and direct referents to race (although they exist) than in *how* we notice and participate in racial worldmaking in our engagement with speculative genres. Speculative fictions “make available certain ways of reading, perception, and cognition and not others” (18). These fictions “embed race in the reader’s capacity to recount the past and imagine the future” and thus “*carry out their effects whether race is seen or not*” (19, emphasis in the original). We cannot reduce race to visible bodies since its presence in the fantastic is much more complex, organizing meaning and becoming a “crucial part of our modal imagination for determining what is possible” (27).

We see this in sites other than blackness. As he demonstrates with yellow peril discourse, demonized, stereotypical representations of Asians became a way of talking about vague, future dangers to the nation. Genre fictions depicting future wars can become a way of organizing what threats to a Western nation will be. The utility of his argument becomes clear when we think about representations of future dystopias in which language and technology from Asia dominate a space even when Asian bodies are not present. From the orientalism of William Gibson’s use of Japan, to “techno-

Orientalism”—which Greta Aiyu Niu describes as “the practice of ascribing, erasing, and/or disavowing relationships between Asian peoples as subjects” (74)—yellow peril discourse has long taught people in the west to see bodies, ideas, and technology as destabilizing human subjects and nations.

The anxiety that racial others will subvert Western nations is also characteristic of plantation fictions and alternative histories. Racial romances like *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) infamously contain racist depictions of black bodies, but Jerng argues that focusing on these kinds of representations elides how the racial logic of these texts structures how justice and injustice should be interpreted (77). Because Dixon shows a world where white people are so clearly victimized, “readers are required to employ antiblackness in the act of choosing a world built on moral probity rather than lassitude” (78). While not technically speculative fictions, putting *The Clansman* and *Gone with the Wind* in conversation with speculative genres illustrates how these are alternative histories that center white subjects in the story of rights emerging from the Civil War. These are the unarticulated grounds for the problem with counterfactual alternative histories about the Civil War that Jerng discusses later. Such alternative histories create false equivalencies about rights and victimization through the mechanisms of the counterfactual, erasing history. Similarly, yellow peril discourse plays a role in some WWII alternative histories in which the “immediate readability” of Asian bodies as dangerous given stereotypical histories overdetermines the readings of the Japanese as atemporal enemies.

Temporality is key to the work of racial world-building of speculative fictions. As representations that simultaneously disavow real referents but constantly establish terms under which we understand the real and future possibilities, US speculative fictions are prominent examples of the disingenuousness of treating a lack of inclusion as the central problem of representational practices. While inclusion is an issue in terms of producers and access, allegedly canonical and mainstream texts are structured by racial logics that teach us about race through displacement, narrative practices, and absence.

Temporality is also key to destabilizing how we read race in Lillvis’s approach to speculative subject matter. While most of her material is not focused on speculative aesthetics or genre fiction—Butler and singer Janelle Monáe are the exceptions—her use of the posthuman places some of these texts in conversation with speculative genres. In Lillvis, the black female protagonists are somewhat fantastic subjects because they “occupy multiple time periods simultaneously” (3). The liminality of the posthuman figure—most

commonly articulated in the form of the cyborg—manifests in black women through the hyperemphasis on the ways in which history is made manifest on the body or through black female subjects. The bodies and narratives constantly call attention to multiple temporalities, thus making them—even in ostensibly realist fictions—time-traveling subjects.

It is an intriguing argument that arguably would have the most purchase in Lillvis's reading of two neo-slave narratives: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which, after all, is a ghost story and has often been interpreted as a magical realist text, and *Kindred*, which explicitly depicts time travel. But her claim that protagonist Sethe's dual relationship as mother and daughter speaks to her posthuman identity is less convincing because it positions so many protagonists as posthuman (14–15). That is, perhaps, her point: that posthumanity is a larger condition of black subjects who may always already have been posthuman. She acknowledges it is somewhat of a metachronistic reading practice. Ironically, her embrace of conventional realist objects of interpretation in how the texts have been discussed perhaps prevents her from embracing the novel as a speculative genre fiction that invites—through the fantastic—alternative modes of futurity.

Lillvis's reading of *Dessa Rose* (1986) offers a similar conundrum, reading the often-discussed relationship between black and white women as modeling posthuman relationality. What then, a reader might ask, is not included in the posthuman? In his exploration of black feminist theorizing of humanity, Weheliye does not quite see Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter as embracing a posthumanity. He sees them as decentering Western white male subjectivity in articulations of the human. Similarly engaged in how black theory is interested in the temporal configuration of black subjects, *Habeas Viscus* creates the conditions for posthumanist theory but is more interested in “new genres of humanity” (137). The idea of the new is a complex idea in relationship to the nonhuman. In Lillvis, subjectivity is about the liminal, potentiality, and the in-between. She argues that “posthuman blackness helps us understand this temporal and subjective liminality as a source of both individual agency and collective authority” (117). Liminality is a position of resistance and survival.

I wonder, however, if an unchangable liminality models a kind of subject position that leaves African American women stuck in-between, or perpetually becoming. The innovation of Lillvis's argument is its application of the posthuman to such clearly humanist texts—neo-slave narratives. For that reason, she focuses on Butler's *Kindred* and neo-slave narrative short story “A Necessary Being,” instead of texts like *Fledgling* or novels in the *Xenogenesis* or

Patternist series, in which people arguably do become something else. In centering liminality as what we can imagine after the human, I confess that I long for a black subject position that is truly new. The traditional concerns of canonical African American women's literature—resistance, mothers and daughters, kinship—are indeed essential to discuss, and Lillvis wants us to see the posthuman as a kind of founding condition of black subjectivity crafted by the conditions of slavery. Is that, however, truly a new genre of the human? Can we ever imagine something otherwise?

Speculative fiction should make us imagine something truly other than what we know. Moreover, imagining otherwise might even lead us to more liberatory articulations of the subject. That is what Schalk attempts to do in *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Spectacular Fiction* (2018). "What might it mean," she asks, "to imagine disability differently? Differently from the stereotypical stories of pity, helplessness, and victimhood, of evil bitterness, and abjection, of nonsexuality and isolation, of overcoming and supercrips?" (2) The same can be asked of blackness, womanhood, and sexuality. Schalk addresses the same problematic of Jerng but does so by flipping the scripts of what the authors are training readers to notice. If most of the speculative fictions that he discusses encourage racist logics in understanding the organization of our world, Schalk is concerned with how genre can encourage us to "question the ideologies undergirding" identity categories (18).

Schalk explores how the authors she discusses not only challenge traditional discriminatory logics in fiction, but some progressive ones. One of the primary goals of her text is to challenge a longstanding resistance to thinking about disability in relationship to race. Because of the "deployment of ableism for racist means," black people often resist "associations with disability," although this resistance reinforces ableist discourse that disability is a sign of inferiority and loss (43). Schalk thus goes back to the canonical text, *Kindred*, and works against the reading of Dana's severed arm as "symbolizing the impact of history, the loss of self, or disruption of black kinship" (46). Instead, she counters the idea of a single rupture that causes disability by suggesting that the common question, "What happened to you?" when someone see a disability, speaks to the demand for a "temporally linear, culturally recognizable, and rationally recognizable" story to explain injury. As with race, this is not possible, and the demand for that kind of answer obscures the quotidian nature of racial injury.

In her discussion of other Butler books, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Schalk argues that the protagonist's disability—a delusional disorder called hyperempathy

syndrome, which results in her feeling the emotions she sees others experience—transforms our understandings of ideal futures. By showing the “unpredictable effects of technology and the possibility of disability-related pleasure,” the series “adds to a broader theoretical understanding of the limits of and problems with the uncritically accepted notion of a technologically created, disability-free future as an inherently positive goal” (108). The issue of pleasure is one of the most radical interventions of the book, thus modeling a new ideal of what the nexus of race and the speculative genre can do. In her discussion of speculative fictions like Jemisin’s *Inheritance* trilogy, Schalk explores how the speculative fictions imagine new possibilities for pleasure. Schalk concludes the text by reflecting on her own pleasure in the consumption of speculative texts. The study of African American literature is, necessarily, a study of oppression, struggle, and resistance. But literature and criticism like Schalk’s open up avenues of foci—not by ignoring black culture in history—but by expanding the parameters of what African Americans experience as human beings.

In some ways, that might be one of the most unspeakable aspects of studying black cultural productions. The texts that we value as “literary” focus on pleasure and possibility but might find new forms of relationality to history. That black futurity might mean ending with pleasure is an Afrofuturist notion that we may imagine as realist as the historical oppressions that bind us.

### Works Cited

- Alter, Alexandra. “She Pulled Her Debut Book When Critics Found It Racist. Now She Plans to Publish.” *New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2019.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2013, pp. 669–85.
- Jemisin, N. K. “Confirmation Bias, Epic Fantasy, and You.” *N. K. Jemisin*, 31 Mar. 2014. Web.
- Jerng, Mark C. *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. Fordham UP, 2018.
- Lavender, Isiah, III. “Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, and Samuel R. Delany’s *Babel-17*.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 187–200.
- Lillis, Kirsten. *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*. The U of Georgia P, 2017.
- Morrison, Toni. “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1–34.
- Niu, Grace Aiyu. “Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson’s and Linda Nagata’s Science Fiction.” *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2008, pp. 73–96.

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. NYU P, 2019.

Shalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Spectacular Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018.

Waldman, Katy. "How Sci-Fi's Hugo Awards Got Their Own

Full-Blown Gamergate." *Slate*, 8 Apr. 2015. Web.

———. "In YA, Where is the Line Between Criticism and Cancel Culture?" *The New Yorker*, 21 Mar. 2019. Web.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Politics of the Human*. Duke UP, 2014.