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FAMILIAR FORMS, UNFAMILIAR CONTAINERS: A FORMAL  
EXAMINATION OF THE BODY, MIND, AND COMMUNITY IN BLACK  
WOMEN'S SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

A Thesis Presented

By

Cameron Clark Bauserman

To

The Faculty of the Graduate College

Of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts  
Specializing in English

May, 2021

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May, 2021

## Abstract

Black Women's writing is ultimately a study in intersectionality and, as such, formalism provides a productive ontology for parsing the intersections of various forms. Using formal theorists Anna Kornbluh and Caroline Levine's works as a starting point, this thesis examines the formal treatment of the body, mind, and community in Black Women's Science Fiction and Fantasy (BWSFF), specifically in the works of N.K. Jemisin and Octavia Butler. The act of defining genre is a historically informed act. As such, this thesis demarcates BWSFF as its own distinct genre because of its treatment of the aforementioned forms. Furthermore, the works within the BWSFF genre form a canon that runs counter to the mainstream white canon. Octavia Butler has said that she "wrote herself" in her novels., I argue that by doing so the project of the genre has become not only to represent the black body in fictive spaces but also to illustrate a path of resistance to white supremacy.

This path of resistance begins with the physical body: the body is the site of prolepsis between the historical past and imagined future in these novels, and reproductive agency figures heavily in the conception of the Black female body as a form. This form of the black female body in turn affects the form of the mind and opposes the current capitalist hegemony by introducing the concept of personal generativity or creation for its own sake. Finally, the forms of the body and mind converge as BWSFF is about building healthy and strong communities as a way to protect the Black body and mind. The texts comprising BWSFF provide a roadmap to community care and activism. In short, the counter canon -- of which BWSFF is part -- is the canon of modern social movements; more broadly, BWSFF is a matrilineal tool.

## Dedication

This thesis is proudly dedicated to Lilleth Ruby Clark, my Grandmother, without whom none of this would have been possible.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Professors Jinny Huh, Helen Scott and Ingrid Nelson for the invaluable knowledge and suggestions they have provided throughout this process. Of course, I thank my parents for their love and support, but mainly for fostering my love of books and curating a vast home library to feed that love. To D. and G., thank you for reminding me to take breaks and stop and smell the roses. Finally, I thank Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin for writing books that lit my brain on fire.

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# Introduction

## The Formal

Genre is a form. At its most base level, it is a way for literary critics, bookstore browsers, and publishers to group books based on their content and conventions. But this minimizes the importance of genre. Writing within a particular genre presupposes certain organizing principles (science fiction presupposes the presence of science and realist novels presuppose the constraints of life on earth), and, in turn, these organizing principles affect the content. But Genre is a flexible form because it is a construction of other smaller forms. As these building blocks grow and change so too does the content. Demarcating a genre therefore is a formal project. Following the scholarship of Formal theorists Anna Kornbluh and Caroline Levine, I explore the agency of forms within Black Women's Science Fiction/Fantasy (BWSFF). This provides a theoretical framework to explore the complex relation between form and content as BWSFF is particularly interested in exploring the concepts of agency and generativity. Formalism, however, is not the heart of this project; rather, formalism provides the language to discuss the way of being in the world that is laid out by BWSFF novels. At the heart of this project is a "matrilineal toolkit." The toolkit is knowledge passed from one generation of women to the next. It consists of stories, practical knowledge, and physicality. This project uses the language of Formalism as a vehicle for understanding the matrilineal toolkit and how it manifests in Black women's relationships, to themselves and each other.

The "agency" of forms is a concept best understood through theorist Caroline Levine's application of the design principle of affordances to formal theory (*Forms* 6). Affordance connotes the latent uses or actions in materials or designs. These affordances

are the bedrock of agency because they allow for forms to deviate from their originally intended use, creating choices. However, this agency cannot be explored or realized without inter-relationality. The affordances of a pencil remain latent if the pencil is unable to interact with other forms. A pencil is only a writing implement until someone needs to hold his/her hair back. As such the interaction of forms is what precipitates their generativity. But generativity is not simply the process of realizing the latent potential in a form. Generativity is the productive capability. To return to the pencil, it can be generative in that it allows someone to write a letter with it or erase a mistake. These actions are generative because they are productive: they produce or contribute to the production of an output.

The link between affordances and generativity is particularly important because no form exists in a vacuum, and all forms have both functions and affordances. Exploring the interrelation or conjunction of forms, is a way of understanding how forms work together to create systems and how these systems operate to create the social space that writers, readers and literary critics inhabit. In short, by rooting literary inquiry in the study of forms, intersectional discussion -- namely that surrounding Black Womanhood and the forms that impact that identity -- become much easier to parse.

This is particularly productive with respect to science fiction (SF) as a genre because of the construction required to create a believable social space within the content of the novel. In *The Order of Forms* Anna Kornbluh notes the intensive construction inherent in a realist novel, “the dialecticity that gives great art its internally consistent, refiguratively resonant, intercalated dimensional wholeness,” this is what good realistic worldbuilding is (48). Kornbluh’s theory about the construction inherent to realist novels

is surprisingly applicable when it comes to SF. The tenets of good worldbuilding in realism -- internal consistency and dimensional wholeness -- are integral to SF if not more integral. Where a realist novel can rely on the assumptions of gravity, oxygen, etc, science fiction cannot assume the same conventions – and if these conventions are employed, they cannot be taken for granted in the project of intensive construction. As such SF is engaged in an architectural project as much as it is attending to the mixing of the mortar for the bricks. In essence to achieve internal consistency, SF engages in intensive construction not only in abstractions and social forms but in the construction of the forms on which the abstractions are founded as well.

Kornbluh cites realist theorist Fredric Jameson's work on architecture as the basis for her theory about architecture as an extension of the realist project. But the question remains, how does this connect to SF? Fundamentally, because Kornbluh invokes Jameson in the construction of her theory, his thinking is what provides the connection between this realist formal theory and SF. In many ways this is definition by negation since SF and realism seem at least in theory to be diametrically opposed. Realism, as a project, is "absolutely committed to the density and solidity of what is" (qtd. Kornbluh 49). While SF is "the literature of ideas," Octavia Butler, whose works we will submit to the formal treatment later in this project, was drawn to the genre because of its formlessness. "The freedom of it; it's potentially the freest genre in existence" (qtd. *Scholar*, 15). However, there is a difference between realism's stated project and its actuality. "Realism appears as the referential capture of what already exists, even if what exists is fluxus and change,"(Kornbluh,7) . For Jameson, this ultimately creates a paradox of what the realist novel is, a formless form. Since the novel attempts to capture and

describe a temporal reality that is constantly in flux, realism is not ever truly “real.” The form of the realist novel is ungrounded in this way. To quote from Jameson directly, “The novel is the end of genre....It is not an outer conventional form” (qtd. Kornbluh 49). As such, the novel is a process rather than a form unto itself.

It is Jameson’s concept of the novel as a process that is most helpful to unpacking SF. While realism is bound to reality, SF is ungrounded when it comes to both its form and content. However, that is not to say that the forms which comprise the content of these novels have no basis in the real space. In fact, the project of SF, like the realist novel, is to be an experimental social space. But because SF is not bounded by realism, it has the opportunity to suspensively integrate forms that otherwise might not come into contact. Returning to the affordances of forms, “if forms lay claim to a limited range of potentialities and constraints, if they afford the same limited range of actions wherever they travel, and if they are the stuff of politics, then attending to the affordances of form opens up *a generalizable understanding of political power*” (Levine 7). While Levine is not strictly referencing SF here, her theory that forms bring their affordances with them is productive in that it illustrates what forms bring with them when they travel. The sublimated idea is that moving forms can be a way to study them.

It is in this way that the novel becomes a process. The process of working through how forms react in unfamiliar containers. Essentially, SF is itself a science experiment, one in which the author can place a familiar form into a controlled container and see how the form reacts and adjusts. Because the forms bring their affordances and constraints with them the novel becomes a process to explore and think through the particular form or combination of forms. Perhaps the most productive part of this is how forms

undermine and “deform” themselves in the experimental containers which constitute narrative. De-forming is particularly generative because it shows how forms undermine themselves, this is helpful to novels as a process in narratives which are attempting to reckon with forms that inflict trauma such as racial enslavement. And so, we arrive at the central question: What good is all of this to black people?

Octavia Butler centers her essay “Positive Obsession” (1989) around this very question, and for Butler the answer is self-evident: it’s the process. “Positive Obsession” follows Butler’s trajectory as a writer, beginning with her mother reading her bedtime stories. Process is integral to the structure of Butler’s essay, and to answering the central query itself. But this is perhaps most evident in her string of rhetorical questions, “What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction?” (*Bloodchild*, 135). Butler’s Socratic approach to her original question is indicative of the answer. The “good” science fiction does for black people is that it gets them thinking, it gets them talking, it provides an avenue to help them make sense of and process the world around them. “At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what “everyone” is saying, doing, thinking—whatever “everyone” happens to be this year (*Bloodchild*, 135). Butler’s insistence on getting off the beaten track is indicative of the counterculture that good SF represents. For Black people this counterculture is essential to survival. The “process” that a novel represents is not just the

process of its construction, but also the process of suspensive integration of forms, not just the content of the pages, but the integration of reader and text.

But what good is all *this* to Black people?

Caroline Levine posits that “Any attempt to recognize a work’s genre is a historically specific and interpretive act” (Levine, 13). As such, the genre here is not simply SF but rather a subsection of SF. The genre in question is Black Women’s Science Fiction-Fantasy (BWSFF), a sub-genre of science fiction marked by the interrelation of form and content. It is an umbrella term used in this paper to reference texts written by Black Women that have been marketed as Science Fiction. However, “fantasy” is included in the term because some of the novels included are not strictly Science Fiction despite being marketed as such. This is due to SF’s positionality within the canon of Western Literature. Known mostly for its pulp beginnings, SF has largely been the literature of the working class. This is partially why BWSFF is so interesting -- the bloom of BWSFF has largely coincided with appreciation for SF by the literary establishment.

Octavia Butler, in particular, was long considered to be the “first and only” black female SF writer of note. Functionally, she is the “mother” of BWSFF. Jemisin has repeatedly mentioned how she “found” SF through Butler’s works. The connection between these two women is important because the dynamic between these two authors is reminiscent of the general project of BWSFF. Butler fills the almost maternal role in founding the genre and Jemisin builds on her legacy, taking up the proverbial mantle. N.K. Jemisin is part of the new wave of BWSFF authors. Jemisin, like Butler, has won multiple Hugo and Nebula award winning novels and a MacArthur genius grant. In many ways it is as if Butler handed down the goals of BWSFF to Jemisin. The two authors’

relationship is rooted in the idea of the matrilineal toolkit and the exchange of ideas for survival and success between generations. While the concept of BWSFF does not exclude other authors, I focus on Butler and Jemisin as the foundation of BWSFF partially because of their prominence but also because of the consistent presence of forms across their respective canons. Functionally, SF is the literature of ideas and, yet, these two authors continually return to the same formal concepts and ideas across the generations of writers they represent. Although these forms are explored by Butler and Jemisin in different ways, the consistent appearance of these forms, specifically reproductive enslavement, are a reflection of the anxieties present within the real social space. They appear often within BWSFF novels because these forms are still being processed and grappled with outside the fictive space. These forms are what govern the matrilineal toolkit: broad forms that govern how identity is conceived. Through the ungrounding space that these novels provide, the authors of BWSFF are able to experiment with, and demonstrate ways of navigating the world for the protagonists of their novels. Since in BWSFF these protagonists are often themselves Black women, the genre becomes a way to show other black women how to navigate the world. As such, BWSFF traverses between historical forms, the forms of the real social space and the materialist forms that comprise the worlds of the texts themselves.

## The Reflexive

The first formal aspect upon which Black Women's Science Fiction is built is the genre's reflexive capabilities. This is a dual reflexivity. First, the genre is reflexive because Science Fiction is social commentary. For BWSFF looking to the past is essential because it entails reckoning with the lingering trauma of reproductive slavery.

Reproductive slavery, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a whole is a central part of Black SF authors' conception of future concerns because Trans-Atlantic slave trade is what gave rise to the current economic and social systems that continue to minoritize and disenfranchise Black Women.

SF is inherently generative in its construction, meaning that as the “literature of ideas” the genre is by default creating and generating concepts, ideas and containers to experiment in. However, as this generativity is quality of all SF this raises the question of why BWSFF is of particular interest. This rests on the concept that Black Women are social theorists out of necessity. Levine writes that “Forms overlap and intersect...Intersectional analysis...focused our attention on how different social hierarchies overlap, sometimes powerfully reinforcing one another – How for example race class and gender work together to keep many African-American women in a discouraging cycle of poverty” (Forms, 4). Though her focus is not on the experience of Black Womanhood, the black female existence is the most visible intersectional form. It is for this reason that I pay special attention to Black Women's SF as opposed to Black SF as a whole, there are simply more intersections governing Black Womanhood and as such it is a more generative and complex form to explore.

By virtue of the Black Female Body's positionality relative to other forms, Black Women are required to understand the real social forms that constrain their social position and self-expression. I remember sitting at my Mother's feet as a child listening to her detangling the politics surrounding Black Hair as she gently detangled mine. This understanding of real social forms is built into the existence of Black Women and this understanding is handed down from generation to generation. Survival is predicated on

understanding these social forms, for the purpose of navigating them. This intersectional understanding is what makes the intersection of Black Womanhood and Science Fiction particularly generative.

The second formal aspect of SF that BWSFF relies on is the genre's temporal reflexivity, SF is easily able to traverse between past, present and future/other worlds. However, when Octavia Butler began to write, SF was raceless. Instead of turning to race to find "the other" SF had historically looked away from earth to Martians/Aliens or the Scientific Grotesque, these creatures were quite literally not human. Humans were white. This casually enforced racelessness coincidentally made SF the perfect grounds to create a social commentary within, as Toni Morrison notes, "the act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is in itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints but not the hand" (Morrison, 46). But BSWFF turns this into social critique by insisting upon the presence of blackness in its pages. This insistence is both disruptive to the classical form of SF because BWSFF acknowledges the whiteness of the genre itself by virtue of negation of that whiteness. BWSFF is by virtue of the whitewashing of the genre able to examine how (to loosely quote Toni Morrison) American literature was and is complicit in the fabrication of racism, and perhaps more importantly how literature undermines the structures of racism and power (Morrison, 16). Delineating BWSFF as its own genre is a rhetorical move acknowledging that America has not moved beyond its history of racism, exploitation and enslavement. BWSFF runs counter to the established canon, in fact it is the blueprint for establishing an effective counter-canon.

Rather than looking to the future and imagining new systems of justice. BWSFF spends a good portion of its time illuminating the insidiousness of the current system and warning of the broader effects if the system continues on its static path, this is due in part to BWSFF existing as part of the generational knowledge passed down through the matrilineal toolkit. BWSFF is both formal and materialist in that it is engaged in knowledge construction via its existence. To quote Anna Kornbluh, “Constructing Knowledge comes not from the individually lived experience of consciousness but instead of the collectively lived experience of social relations” (Kornbluh, 19). The lived experience of Black women and the history surrounding the form of the Black body is the consistent form which is by virtue of SF mapped into unfamiliar containers. Any meaning derived from the conjunction of the familiar form in the unfamiliar setting is a reflection on current and ungrounded social forms.

Furthermore, BWSFF is particularly concerned with social forms. Given the minoritized positionality of Black Women within the real social space, much of the work BWSFF novels do is in imagining new social forms. Formally, this is in keeping with Kornbluh’s concept of the novel, “Novels suspensively integrate multiple ideas, and in the projective models of relations through which literary realism discloses the ungroundedness of all socialites while building them up anyway” (7). Because BWSFF is essentially social theory, it challenges the reader to try and find familiar social forms in an unfamiliar landscape. When the reader finds commonality with, or meaning in, these texts it drives home how these social forms are ungrounded because they are a production of cooperation between individuals, or in this case how the individual will manufacture social forms even in an unfamiliar container. This is what makes SF so adept at creating

new theoretical forms, it asks the reader to read reflexively and by juxtaposing the imagined social space with the “real” one the reader brings with them. In summation, formal social theory is at play in SF and the formlessness of the genre is what allows it to easily engage in conversation with the ungrounded forms of reality.

## The Generative

Writing is intimately linked to generativity. But writing represents mental generativity and the generativity of ideas. It is reproduction. Octavia Butler describes her writing process as beginning with “sexiness, not only sexiness in the sense of people having sex. But sexiness in the sense of wanting to reach readers where they live and wanting to invite them to enjoy themselves” insofar as she wants to enjoy writing her work as much as she wants the reader to enjoy interacting with it, however sexiness both in the physical and metaphorical conception ends with the “release”— in the case of novels, the dissemination of ideas from text to reader (qtd. Mehaffey, 102). The conversation between reader and text, the sexiness that Butler is striving for in her writing is a generative experience. Ideas do not stay static during their transfer between text and reader, “Reading fills the well of your imagination. You can return to the well and draw the water you’ve put in there” Butler says of the relationship between reading and ideas the relationship is reflexive and transformational –ideas become more affordant to the reader based on the reader’s experience and needs. (qtd. Rowell, 87). Within the text of her novels, however, Butler begins with physical generativity. That is the body as a site of generativity or more specifically resource extraction.

The body as a site of resource extraction is not a new idea, however, the body as separate from what it produces *is* a relatively new one, rooted in the structure of

capitalism. Tracing this thread of (re)production and the body back through history, we arrive at the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. The western form of Black Women's bodies was created specifically, as a way to dehumanize them for the purposes of resource extraction. Scholar Rebekah Sheldon terms the link between human bodies and their reproductive futures, Somatic Capitalism, defining the term as, "the literal and material conjunction of the child and capital...the intervention into and monetization of life-itself. Rather than focusing on the domestic household, somatic capitalism operates above and below the level of the individual subject to amplify or diminish specific bodily capacities" (Sheldon, 4). Sheldon notes that the impetus behind this link is capital.

Under reproductive slavery, which was founded with the intent to create an ever renewing and easily exploitable workforce requires us to look at the structure which gave rise to reproductive slavery, capitalism. As such, the value of labor in a capitalist system is placed on the generative efforts of the body *not* the mind. But what somatic capitalism ignores is the possibilities of the mind, since it is concerned purely with resource extraction from the body (Sheldon, 3). Somatic capitalism is also concerned with monetizing outputs, but to keep the form of the body only as a site of resource extraction. As such the ability to invigorate the mind of the worker is antithetical to the goals of somatic capitalism, now neoliberalism, operating smoothly.

The ability to invigorate the mind of the worker, as good writing does, is antithetical to the goals of neoliberal-capitalism, operating smoothly. Since Black women were disproportionately affected in the mind/body disconnect under reproductive slavery, Black female authorship is particularly radical because it gives the author the ability to survive based not on the output of her body but of her mind, she is in control (at least

partially) of the capital she generates, and especially within BWSFF the writing serves as a ground to castigate and restate the injustices of America's past present and possible futures. In this way, "Social Space...infiltrates, even invades, the concept of production, becoming part—perhaps the essential part—of content" (Kornbluh, 11). The radical act of producing a generative piece of writing is based in the former loss of control over the generativity of the body. As such, the social space invades the concept of production and reproductive agency becomes an inextricably essential part of the finished product. Through this model of interrogating the historical social forms imposed on the Black female body, the social forms at play in BWSFF novels become richer. Essentially, the form of the novel becomes generative because of the reproduction of ideas. Furthermore, in this way we can understand BWSFF as a reaction to past societal traumas. This does not reduce the genre to Black pain and trauma but rather puts the narrative in conversation with the past, the context allows us to better extrapolate meaning from the text.

But beyond extrapolating meaning from the text, there is a vested interest in what BWSFF novels create by virtue of existence. Octavia Butler is quoted as saying that she "wrote herself" in her novels. The protagonists of BWSFF are almost always women, who survive and create community wherever they go and while Butler and Jemisin may have been writing themselves they were also creating not a new form, per se but an archetype of a black woman being at the forefront of change, and in command of power but holding all of this while still being flawed and retaining her humanity. In short, BWSFF has and continues to show generations of Black women how to embrace their

complicated intersectional identities in full and how to claim the power that comes with it.

# I. The Body

*Interviewer: "How would you say your own body has influenced and perhaps shaped your writing?"*

*Octavia Butler: "Not so much my body, but other people's reaction to it."  
(Mehaffery, 118).*

## Reproductive Enslavement

The form of the black female body is inextricable from its generative capabilities. In fact, it is the body's generative capabilities that shape the Black female body as a form. Since, The Form of the Black female body is rooted in the body's generative capabilities, the individual form of the Black female body is informed by it's theoretical reproductive capability regardless of whether the individual themselves is generative.

The generativity of the Black Female Body is central to Octavia Butler's novel *Wild Seed* (1980). *Wild Seed* is the story of two immortal Africans named Doro and Anyanwu. The parasitic antagonist, Doro, is a spirit who gains immortality by inhabiting other people's bodies. By taking a new host body, he kills the consciousness of the inhabitant and "feeds" his psychological hunger. Doro kidnaps Anyanwu, an African fertility goddess and the protagonist of the novel because of her reproductive power. Anyanwu, has perfect control over every cell in her body, meaning that she can transform herself into any human or animal as well as create medicine. However, Doro prizes her for her ability to bear children who possess her genetic abilities -- people with enhanced psychic and physical ability are more satisfying consciousnesses for him to cannibalize.

Doro kidnaps Anwanyu for use in his eugenics program, reducing her identity for a goddess in her own right to merely a reproductive tool. His motives for Anwanyu's enslavement are at first opaque enough that Anwanyu goes with him willingly, however when his eugenicist motives become clear Anwanyu contemplates suicide, "In her pride [Anyanwu] had denied that she was a slave. She could no longer deny it. ... She could break free of him only by dying and sacrificing her children and leaving him loose upon the world to become even more of an animal" (Butler, 122). Anyanwu in this moment is bound by several competing elements within the form of the black female body – her own desire for freedom, her love for her children, and the guilt of motherhood. Scholar Jennifer L. Morgan explains these competing feelings, "African women most emphatically embodied the ideology of what racial slavery ultimately meant. The inheritability of slavery depended on the biological capacity of African mothers and fathers to pass their social identity as enslaveable—marked as it was on their skin—onto the bodies of their children. Racial slavery, then, functioned euphemistically as a social condition forged in African women's wombs" (Morgan, 56). To further parallel this against the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is to acknowledge that it was the generative-reproductive powers of Black Women that made the trade profitable.

Though Doro enslaves Anyanwu because he values the generative powers of her womb, he fears her too, "He wanted as many children as he could get from her before it became necessary to kill her. Wild Seed always had to be destroyed eventually" (85). "Wild Seed" a concept ascribed to Anyanwu, encapsulates the crux on which her character's impetus is formed: The competing ideas of freedom and generativity. These are seemingly inseparable because the conditions of Anwanyu's enslavement are

predicated on her reproductive generativity – a function inseparable from her body and her identity. However, the dichotomy represented by the term “Wild Seed” is a false one, as it is Doro, who places these two concepts at odds with respect to Anyanwu.

The formal presence of reproductive enslavements in the BWSFF genre is a matter of prolepsis: the most visible reflexive theme in the genre. Eve Alys Weinbaum writes, “by casting back into the slave past to reveal contemporary bio-capitalism as enslaving, alongside a close reading of texts that make an analeptic gesture by reading the past through the lens of an imagined world yet to come, that it becomes possible to discern that four hundred years of slavery ought to be recognized as bio-capitalism” (17). In essence, to understand the current and possible future social systems that will dictate human behavior requires looking to the past. Butler’s own advice to young writers’ stresses this, “We don’t really learn from our history, because from one generation to the next we tend to reproduce our errors. There are cycles in history...Learn all you can about the way we work, the way we tick” (qtd. Rowell 85). *Wild Seed* collapses the cycles of human history into narratives, and reproductive slavery is what she chooses as the starting point for the modern cycle of human history. Reproductive enslavement is such a powerful form that it can be used to ground all of modern history.

While reproductive generativity is inextricable from the form of the Black-female body, it is not the only form constraining the body, reproductive generativity and by extension reproductive enslavement are generative offshoots of bio-capitalism. Doro is a deeply capitalist figure in that he survives by cannibalizing the consciousnesses of people, and then inhabiting their bodies. He profits off both their mental and physical generativity. As such, the eugenicist project he embarks on, attempting to “build” a new

race, is deeply capitalist in that he is engaging in the exploitative enslavement to literally feed his consumptive urges. “I search the land for people who are a little different –or very different. I search them out, I bring them together in groups, I begin to build them into a strong new people” (19). The difference that Doro is searching for are genetic anomalies that give these “different” individuals aptitude for things like, telekinesis, mind control, transfiguration etc. These attributes make their consciousnesses more satisfying for him to consume because they are more complex than average people. Essentially, Doro sets out to create a race of people similar to him, making his act of consuming them akin to cannibalization. However, Doro eventually loses control of his “breeding stock.” Examined through the capitalist lens, this provides interesting commentary about the self-defeating side of capitalism -- and how it poses a danger to all involved in the system beyond people who are subjugated.

This relationship between generativity and destruction is mirrored in Doro’s relationship with Anyanwu. Since the relationship between Anyanwu and Doro is reflexive, she trades her freedom for that of her existing children, and Doro’s promise that he will not consume any children she bears as part of his eugenicist project. In return Doro is able to access the generativity of Anyanwu’s womb, even if his ability to reap some of the benefits of that labor is curtailed. Fundamentally the relationship between Doro and Anyanwu hinges on her power to create and his urge to consume. While this may seem to be a basic predator-prey relationship, Butler subverts this by acknowledging the power of generativity. It is both what makes Anyanwu desirable to Doro and what makes her a threat. Butler’s social commentary is to superimpose this complicated relationship onto the backdrop of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. The juxtaposition serves

to highlight the importance of the generativity of the womb. It is what Doro wants from Anyanwu and this reproductive capability and her ability to generate children who serve his consumptive ends is what keeps him from destroying her. Furthermore, by setting a reproductive enslavement narrative against the backdrop of the slave trade Butler is able to juxtapose the eugenicist motivations of both Doro and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Racialized slavery, at its heart is a eugenicist project. Yes, its motivation lies in the bio-capitalist mode of production is about resource extraction, but it is committed to the production of a valuable product, people. “Women’s lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs. Whether laboring among sugar cane, coffee bushes, or rice swamps, the cost benefit calculations of colonial slave owners included the speculative value of a reproducing labor force” (Morgan, 3).

Through the relationship between Anyanwu and Doro. Butler explores an affordance of reproductive enslavement– eugenics. While Butler, has removed the racial element of the enslavement, Anyanwu’s children are not marked by their racial identity but rather their inherited inhuman abilities, the concept of inherited slavery remains.

However, what makes this form dynamic is not its presence in the novel but how characters react to it. Fundamentally, it is the emotional responses to reproductive enslavement that make this form familiar – the empathy that the pain of reproductive enslavement evokes from the characters is ultimately what grounds the form, by humanizing it. Though the concept of reproductive enslavement is abstract, it is given meaning by the emotional responses of the characters. Anna Kornbluh paraphrases Plato’s ideas about forms, “Forms (both ideas and shapes) belong to an abstract realm of general essences that are only experienceable as materialized in specifically concrete

situations” (27). While the form of SF is not a concrete situation per se, Kornbluh acknowledges that novels suspensively integrate multiple ideas thereby making the integrated forms they address seem concrete within their formal limits. As such novels, but especially SF novels make it possible to materialize historical forms.

By focusing so closely on Anyanwu and tying her so tightly to reproductive slavery Butler manages to marry several ideas; first Anyanwu is a fertility goddess, but this fertility is not merely limited to the generative production of her womb, it is tied into her almost empathetic ability to become something else. Anyanwu’s fertile and generative powers manifest in perfect control over her body allowing her to become immortal, become a pharmacy, and to shape shift. However, Doro considers Anyanwu a liability because of the sexual and reproductive freedom she has enjoyed, “She was spoiled. She had known too much freedom. Like most wild seed, she had been spoiled long before he met her” (Butler, 184). It is he who puts these two ideas at odds with one another because he has difficulty controlling Anyanwu and bending her generative capabilities to his will. Returning to the concept of speculative value Doro applies a cost-benefit analysis to Anyanwu, her value lies solely in her generative capabilities and the genetic traits she is able to pass into the people Doro treats as his “breeding stock” but this is tempered by her “wild seed” attributes which make her harder to control. The outcome of Doro’s assessment is thus, “Anyanwu had almost perfect control over every cell in her body, but her mind was open and defenseless as the mind of any ordinary person” (235). What makes Anyanwu seem non-threatening to him is that her generative control does not extend to control to her mind. As such, Doro considers her a lesser intelligence and

ultimately a nuisance, not a threat. In essence he divorces the affordances of the body from those of the mind.

The generativity of the Black Female body is a central tenet of what constitutes Black Womanhood. From the idea of Black Women's wombs as a source of financial speculation during the transatlantic slave trade up through the concept of welfare queens, the reproductive capabilities of the black body are indistinguishable from the body itself. The generative conjunction between these concepts creates a methodology for subjugating the black female body by controlling how the body exists as a form as well as how it is perceived. But BWSFF through its social commentary provides sites of disruption by lying bare the systematic capitalist hegemony imposed on the black female body. This genre not only lays bare the hegemony but provides an alternative to it – community building. The systematic forms of oppression are nigh-impossible to oppose as an individual but as a collective the threat to the systematic hegemony is real. This follows the thinking of the civil rights movement – that powerful insurrection can be constructed out of community care and solidarity. In the sequel to *Wild Seed*, *Mind of my Mind* Doro is overthrown by Anyanwu's descendants who form a neural network and use their collective power to topple their oppressor. Butler suggests that a strong and unified community is the key to escaping systematic oppression. However, as social commentary, BWSFF does not fail to suggest that these movements – could easily go the way of previous oppressors.

### The Master's Tools Rebel

While N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy is also centered around reproductive control and the concept of "breeding" for certain powerful traits, it is fundamentally the

story of a mother and daughter mending their relationship. The series begins with an earthquake which catalyzes an environmental disaster known as a “season,” which are extinction level disasters. Upon this backdrop, the narrative follows Essun, who is searching for her daughter, Nassun. The narrative follows the two women as the collapse of society allows each to come into possession of their full Orogenic power.

But complicating the mother-daughter relationship is the trauma Essun suffered as a tool of the state and the resulting pressure she puts on her daughter. Ultimately, the series is concerned with survival and reconciliation. But the stress within the central relationship is predicated on eugenics. The concept of breeding people into having inhuman abilities is in fact a way of dehumanizing the characters. The “playbook” followed is very similar Morgan’s research about the rise of racialized slavery, “Confronted with an Africa they needed to exploit, European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded in racial difference,” Morgan goes on to note how this cultural inferiority was based in the black female body, “Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women’s breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism” (Morgan, 49). In essence, the dehumanization of Blackness was rooted in the “othering” of the material form of the black female body. Though both Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy and Butler’s Seed to Harvest Series denature this idea slightly by rooting the condition of dehumanization and enslavement in generative ability rather than physical markers.

But Jemisin takes a slightly different approach to the concepts of generativity than Butler does. Jemisin, begins her narrative by beginning with an ecological apocalypse. The conception of generative power in The Broken Earth Trilogy is tied closely to the

earth, or more specifically Stone. The humans in the story are in an ongoing battle with the earth itself. The roots of this conflict are obscured but the language formed to discuss it takes a strange, gendered turn. Rather than the commonly accepted idea of “Mother Earth” Jemisin’s characters gender the earth male referring to it as “Father Earth” or “Evil Earth.” It is a strange linguistic turn meant to encapsulate the image of the earth not as a loving and giving entity but a harsh and punitive one. Gendering the earth male is a censure on what the earth might become if stripped of its productive generativity. Furthermore, Jemisin’s fiction is determined not only to invoke female generativity but male generativity and reproductive power as well.

Reproductive enslavement is invoked in the opening pages of *The Broken Earth Trilogy*’s first novel, *The Fifth Season*. The person who invokes ecological apocalypse is an Orogene named Alabaster who, “reaches forth with all the fine control that the world had brainwashed, backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection” (Jemisin, 6). Before Alabaster’s identity is even revealed to the reader his status as the product of a eugenicist project along with his immense power are his only distinguishing qualities. By denying Alabaster any identification in the opening passages Jemisin is subtly pointing to how dehumanizing any eugenicist project is. Alabaster’s identity as a byproduct of a eugenicist system is immediately tied to his identity as a slave, “His fingers spread and twitch as he feels several reverberating points on the map of his awareness: his fellow slaves. He cannot free them...He’s tried before and failed. He can, however, make their suffering serve a cause greater” (Jemisin, 6). Not only does this moment reveal the true nature of Alabaster’s position in society it reveals

that his seemingly destructive actions are liberatory in their conception. Liberation within the framework of BWSFF is predicated on leaning first into personal power and then into collective power. This is how the master's tools rebel, by claiming their identity.

Jemisin does not make race the preeminent factor in the enslavement of the Orogenes. Rather, enslavement is based on their ability to exert power over stone. Without race, enslavement becomes somewhat of an ungrounded social form. But Jemisin's decision to structure enslavement around ability is a way of centering not necessarily the physicality of the body as the dehumanizing force but the labor product the body is capable of producing. In many ways this denies the enslaved, the pretense of humanity even further because their enslavement is not predicated on their physicality but rather on genetic difference which is what gives them these super-human abilities to control stone. Instead of leaving the social forms of enslavement ungrounded, Jemisin centers the dehumanization inherent in slavery, not just through Alabaster but through the node maintainers. In the opening pages of the novel, Alabaster psychically reaches out to his "fellow slaves" however, it is later revealed in the narrative that these are node maintainers, Orogenes reduced to nothing but instinct, "sometimes a rogga can't learn control" Alabaster says to the novel's protagonist Essun (140). The use of the word 'rogga', a slur for Orogenes is deliberate as Essun reflects, is "a dehumanizing term for someone who has been made into a thing" (140). The node maintainers are Orogenes who either lack control, or to borrow the term from Butler, are "wild seed" discovered too late to be properly trained, as such the ruling class keeps them in a comatose state, hooked up to machines so that their natural instincts will take over and quell earthquakes the threaten any comms (slang for communities) that are under the node's jurisdiction.

The node maintainer episode is a way for Jemisin to ground the social forms of slavery by introducing familiar ideas. In this case the concept of the enslaved being little more than useful animals, by traveling to the extreme dehumanization that the node maintainers suffer Jemisin is able to clarify that orogenes are only tolerated by society to the degree that they can be controlled and or conform to the limitations society places on them, “You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them?...The only reason they don’t do this to all of us is because we’re more versatile, more useful, if we control ourselves,” Alabaster reveals (143). His comment creates a reflexive relationship between the “acceptable orogenes” who are allowed to maintain the trappings of humanity and the “roggas.” With regard to social forms this is most applicable to colorism and the way that people of color, but specifically Black people are placed in an intra-racial hierarchy based on their ability to assimilate/conform to the trappings of whiteness both in their physicality and their intellect. The form of colorism though placed into an unfamiliar context remains recognizable and as such is ripe for critique.

When Alabaster continues his rant the concept of eugenics and the affordances of the enslaved body reenter the conversation, “Each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines” (143). All Orogenes, not just the node maintainers are reduced to the labor they provide as well as the affordances of their bodies. I say affordances rather than the generativity of their bodies because, generativity is about what the body/mind produces, affordances refers to the uses of the physical body. The node maintainers are reduced to affordances because their agency was stripped from them and they have been reduced to their comatose state they are no longer able to bear children, however their bodies are still sexually afforant,

“I’m told there are men who enjoy this sort of thing. A helplessness fetish” (142). The node maintainers, are fetishized for their helplessness and their continued rape is systematically tolerated because it is a source of income, as Alabaster notes that people “pay for the privilege.” The profitability of sexual violence is social form that Jemisin closely links with dehumanization, not just in the case of the helpless node maintainers but throughout the entire system of enslavement. In fact, Jemisin links the concepts of reproductive enslavement and sexual enslavement together to the point where these two forms are inextricable. Alabaster in particular is sensitive to this and it is through him that Essun is educated in the contingent social forms that allow for the Orogenes continued enslavement.

Alabaster is able to be Essun’s teacher because of his positionality, unlike Essun who is “wild seed” Alabaster is “Fulcrum bred” meaning he was a successful eugenic product of the Fulcrum, the governmental body which oversees the breeding and training of Orogenes as well as the node network. Alabaster, in this way is similar to the position of the Black Female author, raised within the system that keeps him subordinated he needed to learn and understand the social forms governing his positionality in order to survive and make the best of his position. He contributes to the eventual liberation of his people by educating the next generation (Essun) about the social forms especially since she does not have the luxury of experience.

Essun’s education factors into her maternal practices in future, moreover her guilt at having brought children forth into a system where they are subordinated based on inherited ability. This is at odds with her desire to have children and love and nurture them – the entire trilogy is structured around Essun’s fight to find and reunite with her

last surviving child. But for Essun, her story is structured around the grief and loss that having her children taken from her produces – the concept of losing family but specifically children that changes her from a compliant tool into an insurgent.

In many ways this is the affordance of loss. It is the loss of a child that shapes the existence of the Stillness. Jemisin sprinkles in clues to this through the historical passages she provides as epigraphs or footnotes. Cited as an ancient (pre-imperial) folk song she provides this as a footnote, “Some say the Earth is angry/ Because he wants no company;/ I say the Earth is angry / Because he lives alone “(387). While this passage does not explicitly denote loss it does denote the want of a community. Paralleled against Essun’s journey to try and reunite her family, Jemisin begins hinting that the Earth is “angry” because its child has been taken from it too, “She knows very little of the moon...It is a satellite, he said, Father Earth’s lost child” (*The Stone Sky*, 301). The Earth in Jemisin’s narrative, like the Orogenes is a tool – a site of resource extraction that must be controlled to ensure the continued function of society – the Earth is in many ways stripped of its agency. However, the Earth is also a site of resistance given that it uses its “body” to fight humanity – who has stolen the moon from it.

It is the treatment of stone that makes Jemisin’s Fifth Season Trilogy so important to the concept of the body. Specifically, in that she parallels the body with an inhuman substance, stone. Scholar Jeffery Jerome Cohen notes that Stone is an interesting parallel to human endeavors precisely because it is so inhuman. Cohen posits that there is discomfort in the inanimate, or rather the inhuman. Anything which forces humans to confront their mortality or moves us onto a larger scale of thinking is inherently disorienting. But this disorientation ultimately stems from the discomfort with the female

and effeminate. “Stone’s materiality belongs to Eve (the lithic within the corporeal)” (Cohen, 1). This connection may seem odd, given that Stone is generally characterized as being steady while feminine coded objects are characterized for their fickleness. But, the connection between the female and the lithic lies in its generativity. Stone has a great number of affordances “Every object holds unfathomable reserves and cannot be equated to anything else as a way of depleting its possibilities” (Cohen, 4). But, though Stone is regarded as steady, in geologic terms it is anything but; “In the geological frame within which mountains exist, pinnacles rise and fall in fearsome undulations. Peaks ascend when tectonic plates push against each other, crumble as water wears granite to dust and carries to estuaries silt for the making of new rock... stone does not offer itself as a metaphor for natural harmonies, for systems of lasting balance” (Cohen, 3). On a human scale, however, stone is a constant and becomes a record and tool for human activity. What Jemisin does through her Broken Earth Trilogy is to unsettle the lithic-form as a steady constant. In the Stillness, life is defined by near constant seismic events. As such, the lithic-form of the Stillness directly parallels the same storyline as Essun herself. By paralleling these narratives while exploring them on different temporal scales Jemisin is able to illustrate how “Stone becomes history’s bedrock as lithic agency impels human knowing” (Cohen, 4). More literally, Stone allows humans to create tools and facilitates a new age of man. Without the parallel narratives of Father Earth and Essun the lithic form of the Stillness remains ungrounded. The body too, is ungrounded as Orogenes flesh turns to stone if they channel too much power, as such these Orogenes blur the formal separations between human and lithic.

The success of the people in the “Stillness” is predicated on the labor of the Orogenes.

Jemisin in particular plays with the idea of the earth not just as an adversary but also sentinel to human activity as writing is. Her writing takes a meta turn in this respect, as she parallels the written historical records against the actions of the earth within the plot. Furthermore, the narrator of the entire trilogy is a man made of stone – both inhuman and geologic in construction. Both the historical writings and the narration are inhuman in their scale and memory, as such the commentary provided by the narrator is a metacommentary on all of human existence in *The Stillness* and his liminal existence part man, part stone contributes to the meta-formal assertions the series makes about resource extraction and the body.

The presence of the body echoes throughout the text, it is invoked multiple times most often within the context of enslavement, “The Fulcrum, a city itself nestled within the greater body of Yumenes like..well. Syenite would’ve continued the thought with *like a child in a woman’s belly*, but that comparison seems especially grotesque today” (*The Fifth Season*, 65). The figure of the generative body is not only a form within the text but a structural element providing interrelation between disparate ideas. The continual returns to the generative body highlight its importance as form within text.

Jemisin uses this structural framing to introduce ethical concerns into the text with regard to reproductive generativity, specifically the guilt. It shapes the reactions of Essun, the protagonist but “Her vulnerability to sexual exploitation and the lack of clarity about how to formulate a relationship to a child under slavery would compound the violation of enslavement” (Morgan, 56). Just as the figure of “Father Earth” is at war with humanity,

Essun is diametrically opposed to the conditions of her own body, specifically the restraints that her orogenic abilities inflict on her.

In essence, the construction of Jemisin's series with the Black body serving as both form and content is the most secure nexus for examining the formal affordances of black womanhood and generativity. Both Butler and Jemisin examine the affordances of the body and make clear parallels between the conditions of discrimination and reproductive enslavement additionally, both Jemisin and Butler build in community into their stories. However, Jemisin leans into the inhumanness of the community because the community most central to the Broken Earth Trilogy is a community made of stone, a neural network. However, understanding the collective without first understanding the individual is impractical. With regard to forms, we will next take a look at the mind. Finally, With respect to reproductive slavery and BWSFF as a response to that historical trauma these authors seat the reproductive enslavement at the hearts of their narratives. They explicitly term these eugenicist projects as such – but to what end? For the protagonists of these novels, overcoming their circumstances is simply the beginning. The apocalyptic events in these novels serve a greater purpose, they destroy the existing system of social function. This is where the novels truly come into their element as SF novels. They have spent time establishing familiar and painful social forms and after these oppressive forms are unsettled the work of reconstructing society begins.

## II. The Mind

### Identifying the Divide

*Kindred* (1979) is perhaps Butler's best known novel. It follows Dana, a black woman in an interracial relationship as she is sucked back in time from the 1970s to Antebellum Maryland in order to save her white ancestor, Rufus from death in order to ensure her own existence. Eve Alys Weinbaum summarizes the narrative conceit of the novel in her book *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, "In Butler's fictions there are no post racial reproductive worlds populated by free subjects, and it is implied there never have been. Instead, past and present formations are together organized by continuously recalibrated racialisms that rationalize the forms of racial capitalist dehumanization that are necessary for reproductive extractions...even though it appears that the social formations that are described are no longer structured around familiar black and white racial ascriptions and identities" (Weinbaum, 115). *Kindred* centers, at least initially, on the body, and the physical trauma attached to Black bodies. Butler frames the novel with an account of Dana's physical trauma, the loss of her arm. But implicit in the text is the question of sanity, despite the presence of physical trauma that corroborates her seemingly outlandish claims. The hunt for a "rational" explanation grounds the text in reality, "Do you honestly believe you traveled back over a century in time and crossed three thousand miles of space to see your dead ancestors?" Dana's white boyfriend, Kevin, asks. However, this question is subtly perverse as Kevin asks it despite the physical markers of trauma on Dana's body. Implicit in his question is not just his skepticism about her sanity but a willingness to view and separate Dana's body from her mind.

*Kindred*'s focus is on the harm of separating the generativity of the body from the mind. When these forms are treated as separate entities, rather than as pieces composing a whole, it becomes very easy to dehumanize a person. Butler uses this to illustrate how grounded the form of reproductive enslavement is in the modern social space by integrating a woman from the 1970s into the form. Dana's ability to adapt to the terms of reproductive slavery and take an active role in perpetuating the form serves to show how reproductive enslavement is not a purely historical form but the form of reproductive slavery itself as well as the other forms it has generated are very much a part of the modern social space. The reproductive capabilities of Dana's black ancestor, Alice, are what gives the narrative impetus in the first place. Without Alice's reproductive labor Dana, the protagonist, does not exist. Convinced that she is being pulled back in time to ensure her own existence, Dana engineers Alice's sexual and reproductive enslavement.

The narrative structure allows Butler to impose present values onto the past, creating an adept way to view and critique current as well as past structures of life in America – the through line in this case being the capitalist mode of resource extraction. It is the capitalist separation of the body and mind in *Kindred* that allows Dana to overcome her 1970s feminist sensibilities about enslavement. She can divorce herself from the trauma she inflicts on Alice because the necessity of Alice's rape and the children which result from that rape allow for Dana's existence. By treating the mind, the body and its products as separate Dana is able to manipulate her modern distaste for slavery to justify the resource extraction of Alice's womb. The ability to justify her actions in this way creates parallelism between civil-rights era sensibilities and the past, illustrating that the two are not so far removed from one another as to be incompatible. As Dana remarks, "I

had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped acting?” (*Kindred*, 220). Notably, this line of inquiry comes *after* Dana has engineered the rape of Alice. Essentially having secured the existence of the desirable product, the birth of her ancestor, Hagar, Dana is able to engage her mind. By triangulating the relationship of the body, mind and product the question of “when had I stopped acting?” recursively provides a reading of the novel wherein Dana begins to truly integrate into the historical form when she begins to truly participate in it. Her participation in the historical form of reproductive enslavement requires her to see other people solely as bodies and their products. Arguably though *Kindred* focuses on the reproductive generativity and sexual affordances of Alice’s body, it is Dana’s mind that is the central form of the text.

Ironically, the novel is not about Dana’s body or its sexual agency. The dyad between Dana and Alice makes this clear. Rather Dana’s journey is about control over her mind. It is the oddly protective cover that Alice’s sexual and reproductive enslavement gives Dana that allows her to be seen this way. Butler’s rejection of the concept of a “post-racial” world is illustrated best through Dana and Alice’s relationship. Dana rationalizes her actions in the dehumanization of her ancestor, as she orchestrates Alice’s repeated rapes. However, Dana is able to rationalize it *because* her existence is contingent upon Alice’s sexual enslavement. But when it comes to her own sexual enslavement she balks. This divide between the agency of Dana and Alice is the basis of the recalibrated racialism. As Alice notes, “[Rufus] likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike if we’re to believe what people say...Anyway, all that means is

we're two halves of the same woman – at least in his crazy head” (228). Given that Rufus considers these women two halves of the same whole, the divide between Alice and Dana is based on what they afford to Rufus. He catalyzes the recalibrated racialism; Dana is spared from sexual enslavement because Rufus can take pleasure in the sexual affordances of Alice’s body. Since Rufus is sexually satisfied by repeatedly raping Alice, he can then see Dana as more than a body, he can appreciate Dana for her intellect. The superficial similarities between Alice and Dana are what cement this duality. Alice is the version of Dana that is fully integrated into the historical form of reproductive enslavement and because of Alice’s enslavement Dana is able to benefit. But, after Alice’s suicide Dana becomes the new target of Rufus’s sexual enslavement – culminating in his attempted rape of Dana at the end of the novel.

Dana’s body is invoked as a form only because of the sexual desire both Kevin and Rufus feel for her. Dana’s relationships to these white men shape her responses throughout the novel, and her relationships to Rufus and Kevin respectively are what shape the text. Her social bonds to these men rather than her Black ancestor are emblematic of the competing social forms she must reckon with. Following this logic, Dana’s assimilation into the historical form of reproductive enslavement is predicated on the attitudes of the white men in her life. Subtly, Butler is pushing the narrative that it is not the broader social forms of the 1970s social movements and empowerment that save Dana but rather the persistent social form of whiteness and the privilege and power it entails. It is the reintroduction of the post-slave world in the form of Dana’s husband Kevin that pulls Dana back from her integration into the historical form. Their conversation is structured around Dana’s sexual agency or lack thereof. “Look, if

anything did happen, I could understand it. I know how it was back then” Kevin says, but his understanding is not based around the pain that the rape would cause Dana. Rather, as she clarifies in her retort, his understanding is his forgiveness for the sexual transgression as well as forgiveness extended to the social forms of the time, “You mean you could forgive me for having been raped?” she asks him (245). The exchange pulls Dana away from her integration into the socio-historical form of reproductive enslavement because Kevin calls it to her attention more fully. It is not just the threat of rape that Kevin is theorizing forgiving her for, it is the entire socio-historical form that made Dana’s theoretical rape possible – he is not forgiving Dana for her actions in the past he is forgiving the past for the actions it may have caused her to undertake and the trauma inherent in that relationship. In short, Kevin is not enraged by the racism and sexism of slavery, but instead, understands the possibility of rape as a consequence of the time. His willingness to write off her lack of sexual agency is what infuriates her and scares her because it shows just how dangerous her position in the past is, and how easily she could end up in Alice’s position. This conversation collapses the space Dana has created between herself and Alice, and she is forced to reckon with how far she is willing to assimilate into the historical form.

The threat to Dana’s sexual agency comes from Rufus. He is the catalyst for Dana’s collision with the historical form as she is drawn back in time to save him and in doing so ensure her own future existence. However, he is also the historical form’s most insidious tool for Dana’s assimilation, “Rufus and his parents had still not quite settled back and become the ‘dream’ Kevin wanted them to be. They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They had made their own limbo and held me in it” Dana remarks after

her first brush with the past (18). By characterizing Rufus as a spectral force “shadowy and threatening” he has from the outset of the novel managed to pervade Dana’s life in the present. But as the novel progresses Rufus becomes less spectral and more real to Dana the more, she interacts with him. He is grounded through the physicality of their interactions. At the novel’s close Dana reflects, “I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master and not as my lover” (260). Ancestor, younger brother and friend are positions which are on an equal playing field with Dana in terms of status and relation, however master and lover represent an escalation, and possible imbalance of power. For context, Dana reflects on her relation to Rufus as he is attempting to rape her in the closing pages of the novel. It is here that she breaks with the historical form, with her sexual agency truly coming under threat. To consummate her relationship with Rufus would be to wholly assimilate into the historical form. In essence, Dana would be replacing Alice literally trading her body for one that is no longer physically affordant.

This reproductive and sexual enslavement is not carried out for its own sake, it is carried out with the ideal of an end product in mind. With respect to Rufus and Dana, it is the natural next step in Dana’s assimilation to the historical form necessitated by the absence of Alice, Dana’s historical intermediary. Within the context of the capitalist form, it is about Rufus’s sexual consumption of the women he sexually enslaves as well as maximizing production through “breeding” slaves since on a consumptive/productive level “ownership of land meant nothing without workers to cultivate it” (Morgan, 70). The reproductive capabilities of the womb were in this sense tied to the reproductive capabilities of the land itself, a generative affordance of reproductive enslavement. The

stakes of Dana's assimilation into this historical form is her mind. It is what she stands to lose. She notes earlier in the text when considering Alice and Rufus's relationship that, "There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (124). In essence, Rufus's "love" for Alice blinds him to her repeated refusals and is what allows him to justify repeatedly raping her. Dana recognizes that Rufus holds a similar love for her, and that consummation of that love would allow him to justify treating her the way he did Alice, using her solely for her body instead of for her mind.

### Personal Generativity

Although Dana escapes the past, she does not come away from Rufus/the historical form, unscathed, "Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it – painlessly, at first –melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm was being absorbed into something. Something cold and non-living." Losing her arm is a subtle way to affirm the reality of what transpired by tying to it Dana's physical body, it grounds the events and takes them from abstract social forms into material reality. But beyond that the amputation of Dana's arm is a physical reminder of how the social forms that made reproductive slavery possible continue to de-form the modern body itself.

*Kindred* places the form of the physical body as a hindrance to the form of the mind, in many ways this allows Butler to examine black womanhood as a form based in antithesis where the forms of the body and the mind are treated as almost separate. This split provides a container to observe the complicated and often competing forms governing black womanhood both internally and externally. Taking this concept into account alongside the other projects of the genre, the narrative structure of *Kindred* gestures

towards BWSFF's goal of getting people to embrace their own agency. The texts are less about creating new structures of racial justice and more about recognizing and avoiding past mistakes and pitfalls while moving forward. While this may seem like a contradiction, suggesting new structures which would invariably compete with the existing network of forms. Essentially, the texts are a proleptic gesture to elements of modern systems of racial justice. By pointing out the shortcomings of existing systems in a thought-provoking manner, BWSFF provides the reader with foundational knowledge of how things currently work. This is in keeping with the concept of the matrilineal toolkit which passes down knowledge but allows successive generations to interpret how they want to move forward with it. It is a deeply political move because it fosters individual and collective agency.

Ironically making room for the next wave of thinkers does give rise to a new structure, the most foundational element of which is personal generativity: creation for the sake of the individual's own good and edification. Personal generativity is based in passion, in fact the whole genre of BWSFF is born out of personal generativity, as Butler notes in *Positive Obsession*. Like Butler, Dana's personal generativity is present through Dana's education or more specifically writing. It is writing that provides Dana solace during the emotionally fraught moments of the text. "I ate a little, then went away to the library where I could be alone, where I could write. Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn't say them, couldn't sort out my feelings about them, couldn't keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for me and no one else" (252). The writing Dana describes is a tenet of BWSFF, it is a corollary to the reproductive enslavement that has characterized the texts so far. Whereas reproductive

enslavement is predicated on the coerced generativity of the body – this kind of personal writing is generativity of the mind, it is creation for its own sake. Though Dana does not write with the intention of disseminating her thoughts in the selected passage the concept of writing as an outlet relates closely to the meta-themes that define the genre.

On a meta-analytical level writing as a technology, namely writing as a more enduring and expansive way to transmit stories and knowledge, is part of the project of BWSFF as a way of reclaiming generativity and shifting its focus from the body of the black woman to the mind. When talking about the mind as a form, education and its applications are its natural corollary.

Writing as personal generativity is a theme throughout Butler's work, specifically the parallel of writing is reproduction and writing as an act of self-preservation. "The act of writing itself was a kind of therapy." Writes Lauren Olamina in *Parable of the Talents* (236). During the passage, Lauren is imprisoned at a Christian re-education camp. The writing she does there is a way to stave off madness and the appeal of suicide. However, it is an act of self-preservation despite the threat of violence if her writing is discovered. To return to Butler's essay, "Positive Obsession" an examination of why she writes, we arrive at our original question, "what good is this to black people" (*Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 135). For Butler writing is a necessary site of struggle and resistance, "What good is [SF]'s examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction?" She asks in "Positive Obsession," but then follows with, "at its best, SF stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets the reader off the beaten track, off the narrow narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying." With this concept of SF stimulating thinking, it is hard to take Butler's refrain, "And what good is

all this to Black People” as a self-defeating one (Bloodchild, 135). Fundamentally, understanding social systems, anticipating potential sites of discrimination and understanding social organization and political direction are fundamental concerns to black people, especially when the possibility of subjugation is on the line. Writing SF, for Butler is an act of self-preservation, as well as cultural preservation as seen within the texts of her work as well as her reflections on her motivations.

It follows then that writing, or more broadly personal generativity would feature heavily in the rest of Butler’s oeuvre. Butler combines writing and religion as sites of personal generativity into Earthseed, a religion created by Lauren Olamina, protagonist of *Parable of the Sower*. Earthseed follows a pedagogy of personal empowerment, hinging on the principle that “God is Change” and therefore individuals have the power to “shape” God be it individually or collectively. At its basest level, Earthseed is a break away from Judeo-Christian religions which are by default patriarchal in their organization. Earthseed by comparison is genderless, thereby removing the religion from patriarchal systems of organization such as hierarchical organization, in fact Earthseed becomes a model for the rhizomal model of social organization. This is due in part to the concept of personal empowerment which is central to the religion itself. Furthermore, the rhizomal structure Earthseed employs represents a move away from centralized forms of power and governance.

This mode of community-based organization is particularly suited to the ecologically ravaged world Lauren inhabits. Again, the community-centered mode of organization stresses the power of the individual and by extension the power of the community. I classify the emphasis on individual power and by extension community

power as affordances of the mind because this method of social organization represents a fundamental shift in the approach to the self. Whereas under capitalist forms of social organization the individuated self is stressed, under this community-based system the we-self takes priority and through the productive power and mutual aid functionality of the we-self the individuated self is actually freer to generate. But this positive conjunction between the individual and collective makes the delineation between the community and the self surprisingly difficult. As such, there is a fair amount of crossover between the two.

Jennifer Morgan addresses the reorganization of social forms, “Scholars have differed on the trajectory of the transition from a “we-self” to an individuated self...this process of individuation was enmeshed in the intersectionality of discourse about race and gender. As an individuated ‘American’ self came into being, key notions of mastery over property were mobilized that defined both whiteness and masculinity” (*Laboring Women*, 73). As such the return to the we-self is at its core a rejection of both patriarchal systems of social organization as much as it is a rejection of the white supremacist hierarchy that is intimately tied to capitalism. The rejection of whiteness and masculinity in this way allows for a new figure to be foregrounded within BWSFF texts. This central figure is of the black female survivor. Furthermore, the roots of the individuated self are tied into restrictive ideas of gender and race – these restrictive ideas also sought to capitalize on the duality of women’s labor, both physical and productive in terms of the productivity of the womb. Where the difference between the individuated self under capitalist organization and community-based organization is the role of labor. Under capitalist organization the production of the individual is compulsory whereas under the

community-based form this production takes a new tack – more accurately being housed under the moniker of personal generativity.

But personal generativity is not just a concept that Butler utilizes. Jemisin too, touches on this concept of personal generativity most notably in her short story “L’Alchemista”. While for Butler, personal generativity appears through writing, Jemisin takes a slightly different tack, cooking. Personal generativity, termed in the text as “creation,” is at the heart of the text. “And while she worked, the small nuisances of the day faded and her mind focused wholly on the marvel of creation” (L’Alchemista, 60). What makes L’Alchemista notable is that it takes on an almost mythic quality. A cloaked stranger appears at the beginning and gives Franca an impossible task, the “marvel of creation” becomes a refrain throughout the story, with the protagonist, Franca, quite literally “losing herself” in it. But Jemisin is careful to link the productive creative outputs of the mind back to the physical body, from her-self-directed generativity, Franca, literally makes magic. But it is the form her magic takes that solidifies the link between body and mind, the meal Franca creates is a youth potion, “the lines in her face had faded, and the second chin she’d been working on since her mid-forties was now smooth taut skin. She examined herself and found that she’d lost ten pounds and her breasts were still in the vicinity of her chest” (67). Inexorably, the “marvel of creation” affects the body. But, within “L’Alchemista” the positive effects of personal generativity sow positive rewards within the body. This is due to a subtle distinction, immediately before Franca creates this life saving meal the narrative falls back on its refrain about the marvel of creation but tweaks it to distinguish work from creation. “Franca had replied that she was not working, but *creating* (L’Alchemista, 64). This distinction places Franca

outside capitalist motivations, furthermore the positive effect of personal generativity on the body offers a rare moment where the body and mind are not conflicting forms, a point on which “L’Alchemista” contrasts strongly against *Kindred*. Finally, the distinction between work and creation offers a new ontological mode for examining production and generativity. This divide between production and generativity shifts focus away from capitalist modes of production as such rejecting the capitalist hegemony that has characterized modern human endeavors. Furthermore, it suggests a mode of social organization focused on generativity rather than production. BWSFF continues to reject capitalist ideals and endeavors.

Ironically, “L’Alchemista” directly references forms and organization during its rejection of capitalism. “But you, [Franca], understand subtlety and balance, the proper places of form and function, the interaction of the world with the senses” (L’Alchemista, 72). This is representative of a substantive return to form and how form plays a hand in social organization. This line is a direct nod to the more abstract forms that shape and guide life and illustrates the reflexive self-awareness that helps to define BWSFF.

But supporting the form of personal generativity is another more concrete form. Returning to *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina is an example of the power of personal writing and education. It is her education that enables her to survive. Indeed, it is education that is the building block for Lauren’s religion, Earthseed. In fact, education is a core principle around which she attempts to build a community. “One of the first duties of Earthseed is to learn and then to teach” (Parable of the Talents, 71). This is embodied in Lauren’s behavior across the two parable books. She begins by “trying to learn whatever she thinks will help her survive” (page?). Linking education and the survivor

mentality is what provides the basis for the form of the black mind in BWSFF. “I realize I don’t know very much. None of us knows very much. But we can all learn more. Then we can teach one another. We can stop denying reality or hoping it goes away by magic” (Parable of the Sower, 58). Lauren establishes a dichotomy between education and blind faith. When paralleled against the backdrop of Earthseed, education and “shaping god” go hand in hand. In essence she is suggesting that education is the most powerful way to shape god. The Epigraph of the chapter in which Lauren discusses education as a route to survival is this Earthseed verse, “A Victim of God may,/Through learning adaption,/Become a partner of God,/A victim of God may,/Through forethought and planning,/Become a shaper of god./Or a victim of God may,/Through shortsightedness and fear,/Remain God’s victim,/God’s plaything,/God’s prey” (Parable of the Sower, 31). Casting the difference between victim and survivor as education and planning once again re-centers the ethos of Earthseed on personal empowerment. But furthermore, serves to cast God in an indifferent role where God can be a predator – which reflexively places more onus on the concept of survival.

Having established how education functions as a survival skill, its framing returns to the reflexive power of the BWSFF genre, this concept fits in nicely. Given personal generativity and how that is a form of self-preservation, education, at its most basic level within the Parable books, is about preserving not just the mind but also the body. Lauren focuses on education as a way to accrue survival skills. In this way education becomes a defensive mechanism. But beyond this, education is what allows Lauren to spot possible threats and avoid them. Chief among these concerns is the threat of slavery, which arises again out of the capitalist society. “Something new is beginning—or perhaps something

old and nasty is reviving” Lauren writes of the company towns which begin to pop up (118). These towns are the beginning of a new wave of enslavement that albeit is not racialized but is still built on the subjugation of other for the purposes of resource extraction. “Anyone KSF hired would have a hard time living on the salary offered. In not very much time, I think new hires would be in debt to the company. That’s an old company town trick—get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery. That might work...Labor laws, state and federal, are not what they used to be” (121). What is interesting is that Butler has neatly predicated this return to slavery on the capitalist system – the two are inextricable in doing so she places the past and present in dialogue – pointing to the mistakes of the past so that Lauren can recognize and avoid them in future.

Finally, as it relates to the body and its intersections with the mind, Lauren’s learning is hardcoded into her DNA. She is hyperempathetic. “He had always believed that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about. The sharing isn’t real, after all. It isn’t some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or pleasure of other people. It’s delusional” (11). Lauren’s hyperempathy is a syndrome passed to her from her mother who was on an intelligence enhancing drug. Her hyperempathy allows her to learn about people’s pain, additionally it is a strange link between mind and body because while it is a delusion it can manifest in real ways like sympathy bleeding. This hyperempathy is part of Lauren’s need to build a community to protect herself. But beyond that, it impacts her reproductive decisions. Lauren is one of the few characters within the BWSFF novels of Jemisin and Butler who is fully in control of her reproductive futures. “My point is—my question is—how in the world can anyone

get married and make babies with things the way they are now? (Parable of the Sower, 87). The possibility of passing on her hyperempathy gives Lauren pause but beyond that she is struggling with the question embodied by so many enslaved women – the ethics and possible guilt of motherhood. In lieu of having a child Lauren devotes her energies to Earthseed.

Ironically, reproductive generativity is present at the heart of Earthseed as well. “Well, today, I found a name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animal-borne, waterborne, far from their parent plants...Earthseed. I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday there will be a lot of us. And I think we’ll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place” (Parable of the Sower, 78). Though this is not explicitly linked to the reflexivity of the genre, Earthseed’s name gets its genesis from essentially a diaspora – as such it is hard not to see Earthseed as a proleptic gesture to those displaced by the transatlantic slave trade, especially given how enslavement begins to come back as a real and present social form within the Earthseed canon. “I’ll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense” (Parable of the Sower, 79). The “them” refers to the older generation, specifically Lauren’s parents. “Pry[ing] them loose from the rotting past” is notable because it speaks not just to the older generation but also ways of life. Lauren recognizes that the past has essentially mired “them” in expectations and misplaced hope. This moment also speaks to the future orientation of BWSFF: while it does interact with the past it is ultimately focused on building more equitable futurities. What makes Lauren

such an interesting character and emblematic of the values of BWSFF is that Butler sets her up in a messianic position. The message? Black women will save the future.

### III. The Community

Octavia Butler's stance on community can be found in a 1997 interview. It is succinct, and its roots are in survival. "I don't try to create communities; I always automatically create community. This has to do with the way I've lived... I've always lived in clusters of people who found ways of getting along together even if they didn't much like each other, which was often the case" (Butler, qtd. Mehaffy, 111). It is the concept of getting along together that drives the survivalist motives of community home. It suggests that the characters in her novels also seek out community, and that community is almost a reflex of humanity.

But, where the form of community comes into question is its organization. Community does not automatically imply harmony or equality, but within BWSFF harmonious egalitarian communities are the ideal that the characters strive towards. Earthseed is perhaps the best exemplar of not only community formation but the ideals BWSFF carries therein. The concept of community, or more broadly of civilization, is addressed within the fabric of the religion. "Civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation. Civilization, like intelligence, may serve well, serve adequately or fail to serve its adaptive function. When civilization fails to serve it must disintegrate unless it is acted upon by unifying or external forces" (Parable of the Sower, 102). Community in this passage is a function of survival as indicated by it being termed an adaptive tool. The underlying message is that community, while automatic in its formation, requires the intervention of intelligence to nurture it and keep it productive. As such, community is in many ways an affordance of the mind. Furthermore, this Earthseed verse by linking

intelligence and community once again places the power back with the individual by recognizing the contributions an individual must make to be part of a functional society.

The conjunction between Earthseed and the goals of BWSFF may seem opaque. However, BWSFF is in part about empowerment through representation. Furthermore BWSFF seeks to create community. To fully understand the importance of Earthseed's concept of community, requires looking once more at the character of Lauren Olamina: first she is a survivor forcibly removed from her home and family. Despite this she manages to forge her own community. Her positionality within the scope of the country is indicative of this too, America is falling apart – governmental regulations of companies are weakened to the point where they become predatory. This is an extreme way of bringing home the point that institutions do not, and historically have not protected the rights of the individual. This is what makes Earthseed so revolutionary, it is a religion which by definition creates a group and then using that group it structures community. The religion is a community centered institution that is better able to create mutual aid for the members it serves. But Lauren also learns, after the destruction of Acorn, the first settlement she created, that the physical community matters less than the mental community, or to put it concisely – it is much easier to kill a physical manifestation of an idea than an idea itself, “I must build...not a physical community this time. I guess I understand at last how easy it is to destroy such a community. I need to create something wide reaching and harder to kill. That is why I must teach teachers. I must create not only a collection of communities as I once imagined, but a movement” (Parable of the Talents, 295). By focusing her energies on teaching, and Earthseed as an idea, Lauren is trying to engage the mind as a way of ensuring Earthseed's survival. Her use of movement

suggests also that Earthseed is more than a religion; it is a value system that drives social change.

Almost as important as Lauren's positionality is the reaction of the ruling class to Earthseed. It becomes a target for white Christianity, Lauren writes, "We'd made a good home for ourselves, were making an honest living. Now people with crosses have come and put slave collars on us" (Parable of the Talents, 188). This moment is an explicit call back to the beginnings of the slave trade and the way in which it decimated communities. In understanding this relationship, the role of community becomes clear within BWSFF it is that community is an affordance of the conjunction of the body and the mind. Within the ontology of the forms discussed in the project, community is only successful and desirable if people are willing to be part of it (bodies) and if people commit to using their minds to sustain and grow the community. Interestingly, community is a recursive form, once it is created it provides more security to the individual body; division of labor, safety in numbers, etc,. And with the body's basic needs accounted for, community reinforces the power of the mind by allowing people to engage in personal generativity, knowledge creation and dissemination, and by creating new systems and modes of cooperation and values within the community. The form of Community is a conjunction of the body and mind because it cannot productively exist without the presence of the body and the mind, however when the body and mind conjoin, the community reinforces and changes the way those forms behave.

Moreover, the repeated gestures towards community in BWSFF are a hallmark of the genre as well as a way to address the historical trauma wherein communities are destroyed. White Christianity has been used as a justification for conquest and as such by

setting up an alternative religion within the Parable books Butler not only rejects the capitalist motivations of colonization but also the religion: Christianity. Ultimately, however, it is a refutation not of the religion itself but of the culture and structures that surround it, hallmarks of the dominant culture: which has failed by definition of what constitutes civilization.

There is also the difference in temporality between Earthseed and Christianity, I draw this parallel because they are opposing doctrines. Earthseed is future oriented– the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, this suggests also a premium placed on the scientific advancement necessary to reach the stars. It is forward looking because the Christo-centric societies with their focus on the now destroyed the earth and caused ecological collapse.

Finally, Earthseed is a model for interconnectedness. The ecological pressures are one of the drivers of conflict in the text as resources become scarce. This scarcity is part of why Earthseed stresses interconnectedness, and community not just interpersonally but between people and the earth itself. The religion is grounded in, among other things, ecological restoration and functioning within an ecosystem instead of disrupting it. This communion with nature lies in the lack of distinction between the human and inhuman or alien. “There is nothing alien/About nature. /Nature/Is all that exists. /It’s the earth/And all that’s on it” (Parable of the Talents, 380). This verse collapses the distance between the alien and human.

Furthermore, this lack of distinction between human/inhuman present in the text is a conscious decision made to oppose the dehumanization Lauren experiences during her time in the religious “reeducation camp”. Lauren reflects on her enslavement, “My

ancestors in this hemisphere were, by law, chattel slaves. In the U.S., they were chattel slaves for two and a half centuries—at least 10 generations. I used to think I knew what that meant. Now I realize that I can't begin to imagine the many terrible things that it must have done to them. How did they survive it all and keep their humanity? Certainly, they were never intended to keep it, just as we weren't" (Parable of the Talents, 268). By eliminating the concept of humanity from her verses the religion is less prone to dehumanizing people and beyond that creating hierarchy between different life forms. The interrelation between Earthseed and nature becomes a cyclical one, "We give our dead/To the orchards/And the groves. / We give our dead/To life (Parable of the Talents, 380). The concept of oneness with the Earth, and God in Earthseed is the epitome of community.

Jemisin takes the interconnectedness between the earth and people to a new level. Community, or rather lack thereof is at the heart of the conflict. More specifically a lack of community is why the Earth experiences so many seismic events, because of the "loss of the moon." The Earth, which has agency in the series is quite literally angry because it is alone. However, in place of the moon and earth dyad, community exists within the novels not only interpersonally but is formed between large rock formations "Obelisks" and Orogenes who use the Obelisks as conduits for their power. "First a network, then the Gate. You cannot do this alone; you need a smaller network to buffer the greater" (Obelisk Gate, 373). Though the conjunction of Obelisks is described as a network, community is also fitting as the cooperation between the obelisks and Orogenes is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation. The structure of organization, the conjoining of smaller groups to support a larger community

is indicative of how groups move from community to civilization. The community between Obelisks and Orogenes transverses the forms of body, mind, and community. Functionally, the connections between Obelisks and Orogenes at its most base level is mental, a neural link. This community link transverses from mental to physical because the community between the obelisks and Orogenes allows the Orogenes to control more power but acting as conduit to so much power transforms the form of the body from flesh to stone.

The community of the obelisks is a transitional one, especially since it leads to further adaptation, Orogenes who channel too much power turn to stone, yes. But this is a temporary state, given “gestational” time, the stone bodies of the Orogenes turn into a new race: the stone eaters, “I have brought you here, reassembled the raw arcanic substance of your being and reactivated the lattice that should have preserved the critical essence of who you were. You’ll lose some memory. There is always loss with change. But I have told you this story, primed what remains of you, to retain as much as possible of who you were” (The Stone Sky, 397). The speaker is Hoa, a stone eater who has been the narrator throughout the trilogy, though this is only revealed in the closing pages of the final novel. This revelation plays off of Octavia Butler’s concept of “writing herself” except Jemisin inverts the idea so that the story “writes” Essun giving context to her past life. Again, formally, the narrative is engaged in a reflexive relationship with itself. Form is again addressed, as Hoa continues, “Not to force you into any particular shape, mind you. From here on, you may become whomever you wish. It’s just that you need to understand where you’ve come from to understand where you’re going” (The Stone Sky, 397). The self engages in a reflexive relationship between its current state and past

experiences, it is notable however that the transformation or even really a solid conception of the self is only possible with the assistance of the community. This is the affordance of community, it creates a space for the productive generativity of the mind and body, in doing so it creates space for a new transformed self.

However, there is an important undercurrent running through the concept of community, cultural preservation. Like *The Parable, and Fifth Season*' Series, N.K. Jemisin's "Red Dirt Witch" deals with the forcible removal of members of a community and the resulting fallout. Viewing these familial separations as an allegory for reproductive slavery it is possible to see how the practice of separating families destroyed communities. and so, the only way to excise this trauma, truly is by rebuilding those communities. "Red Dirt Witch" organizes this rebuilding of the community through food. In times of crisis people look to food both to keep them alive and to comfort them. Furthermore, food is a powerful community builder. Subsistence plots are a common occurrence in both Jemisin and Butler's work. But beyond that, both authors understand the necessity of food on the road — enslaved peoples built the diets of their western masters and in such shaped many of the tastes of the regions they were forcibly brought to. Fundamentally, food is a culture maker, necessity for survival and a way to establish a sense of place. The way it shows up in the fiction is testament to the way it gave the diaspora an identity and in many ways the decision to adapt recipes and grow gardens symbolized the decision to fight for survival, a process by which America became home.

"Red Dirt Witch" engages with this directly. Emmaline, the protagonist of the short story uses herbs from her garden as both medicinal aids, supplements to her cooking and form of protection against the specter of racism and the threat of having her

children taken from her, represented in the text as “a white lady” who, notably, is a “fae” creature most closely resembling a vampire. The centerpiece of Emmaline’s garden is a “sycamore fig...smuggled over from Africa tucked into some poor soul’s wound to keep it safe and living through the middle passage” (How Long Till Black Future Month, 46). Through this fruiting tree are Emmaline’s African roots preserved, and this connection to her heritage and ancestral community functions as both a way to feed her family and a source of protection, “Emmaline trimming a few figs from the sycamore to make jam, sweetening the children’s mouths with the taste of heritage and survival” (Future Month, 53). The “taste” of survival is a key element of food; communities cannot be created without food to sustain them and using food as protection it is an interesting way to link community, heritage and protection.

Formally, food, like community is a way of conjoining body and mind. The mind is invoked through the personal generativity of cooking, and the body invoked through the physical nourishment of the form of the body. Fundamentally, Jemisin’s approach to community building, especially though centering food is formally a New Critical understanding of the “plurality of overlapping forms prompt us to expand the logic of intersectional analysis dramatically, continuing to take the structures of race, class, and gender extremely seriously, but tracking the encounters of these and many other kinds of forms, from enclosures to networks” (Levine, 11).

Fundamentally, Emmaline sacrifices herself to save her daughter from the white woman, but the cultural heritage and protection of food is passed from Emmaline to her daughter, Pauline, who then leverages her knowledge of food into a restaurant which creates further community. Meanwhile the idea of food as protection carries through, the

story follows the survival of Emmaline's children through the civil rights era during which Pauline's restaurant in which the food contains the protective herbs, becomes enough of a community lynchpin to begin mass producing and exporting her food across the country to feed protestors and the black community on whole. It is reiterated several times that in all of Pauline's food she, makes sure there is "a sprinkle of rosemary, sage and a tiny dab of sycamore fig" in every can (Future Month, 57).

In "Red Dirt Witch" is less the physicality of the garden which benefits its owners, but rather the plants which the garden, in conjunction with Emmaline, a mother, bring forth. In this narrative, the garden is less of an oblique form of motherly influence and protection and more of an active player. The adversary in "Red Dirt Witch" is once again white oppression, embodied in a "White Lady," a malevolent, if beautiful witch who preys upon the power of black people. Upon her visit to Emmaline's home, she has a black child who is in her thrall in tow. The vacant look of the child who moves as if "jerked on strings," like a puppet. This is noted by Emmaline's daughter "She *had* power and you took it like a damn thief," Pauline spits in the direction of the white lady (Jemisin, 44). While the sentiment of this observation is true, its delivery violates social norms which dictate the interactions between the races and were it not for Emmaline's garden the interaction would end with Pauline in the shoes of the soulless black child. However, Emmaline's garden, in which she plants herbs protects her, her family and beyond that, her community.

Emmaline's use of the plants she cultivates as a sort of protective spell against evil references old earth magic. A major component of this protective spell is a fig tree Emmaline, and her mother before her had grown and protected. Returning to the history

of the sycamore fig, which was “smuggled over from Africa herself tucked into some poor soul’s wound to keep it safe” (Jemisin, 46). Several things are occurring within this description of the fig tree’s history. The seed’s journey from Africa itself is notable, in that a seedling survived. Moreover, Africa is assigned to the female gender, within the context it is easy to assume Africa as “a mother” to not only the fig tree but to the people who were enslaved. As the fig tree is part of a protection spell it raises the concept that Africa is still protecting her children, even from afar, by the virtue that they remember their roots: customs and magics. The concept that the seedling was “tucked into a wound” creates that idea that this protection is in part generated by the black body and black consciousness. The sycamore fig and the way it functions within the story is indicative of the matrilineal toolkit. Quite literally the fig is a source of bodily nourishment as well as protection -- it helps Emmaline and her children navigate through the world.

Within the fig is the implied idea that the toil and suffering of the previous generation are now a part of the fig tree and by extension are part of what protects Emmaline’s children. Inherent to the suffering of the previous generations is the concept of sacrifice. Emmaline, directly sacrifices herself to save her children, citing the idea that she is what the White Lady wants, “You like children’s beauty but a woman’s don’t hurt none. You like innocence, but you’ll take foolishness. So, here’s mine: *I can’t believe the world will ever change*” (Jemisin, 54). Essentially, Emmaline cites her lack of growth as the reason she would still be of value to the White Lady. Meta-textually this is a rejection of a lack of hope. This lack of hope makes her useful to the “White Lady” but outside of making her an appealing sacrifice does little to protect her children. To contextualize this, another component of Emmaline’s protection spell must be analyzed. “[The White Lady]

spied the rosemary bush at last, growing scraggly in the summer heat. Growing, though, still and by its growing protecting the house” (Jemisin, 45). The concept of growth as protection is also particularly salient, growth implies expansion and frequently that extends beyond the individual and into communities: growth also implies new ideas – which are an inherent threat to the status quo.

This growth mindset finds echoes in the Civil Right Movement of the 1960’s, “Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that the government cannot elude our demands” writes Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in his final novel, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (145). I reference the Civil Rights movement because the goals of community in the aforementioned novels are in-keeping with the goals of the civil rights movement – the novels contain many aspects and approaches to civil and racial justice, however these forms are played out in fictive spaces.

# Conclusion: BWSFF and the Matrilineal Toolkit

So far we have addressed the body, the mind and the community and I have indicated that each of these is a project of BWSFF. Both in that they are the form BWSFF explores as well as forms that comprise the genre. The consistent presence of these forms is what makes the genre. But again, what good is all this to black people.

Returning to the concept that demarcating a genre is a historically interpretive act, I bear the mantle of that. This project is rooted not just in literature but in my own experiences. While Butler notes that she writes herself, I cannot help but feel as a young black woman reading and engaging with these texts that she was also “writing me.” These novels and the matrilineal toolkit they are a part of has played an important part in my own identity development, As such BWSFF as a genre is not just a historically interpretive project, it is a personal one too.

My mother was the one who suggested I read *Kindred*. I remember being skeptical, convinced that I was an anglophile through and through and that Shakespeare and Austen were the only authors I could really connect with, I didn't want to read a slave narrative. But it was my mom suggesting the novel, so I sat down to read it. I finished it in a day. Read it cover to cover without moving from the couch and I remember afterwards feeling like my brain had been lit on fire. For the first time, I was reading a novel that didn't shy away from the complexity of blackness, and a novel that didn't reduce blackness solely to an enslavement narrative. Perhaps, most importantly as the child of a white man and a black woman I felt that there was a character who was also

grappling with similar issues related to identity, someone with a foot in both worlds. I set myself a challenge, for the next year to only read books written by people of color, bonus points if they were women or queer like me. But my mother wasn't the only one who had a hand in my reading, my father's love of Science Fiction pushed me towards authors like Ursula LeGuin who, though not a person of color, was a woman and so an exception was made for her in my personal challenge. Between Butler and LeGuin I realized I liked Science Fiction, that it wasn't just a boys club, and so I started to seek out more Science Fiction written by women and then I found N.K. Jemisin, and the Broken Earth Trilogy, and her books set my mind on fire too.

These books were the beginning of my real social justice education and have only become richer texts since I've learned more. But perhaps most importantly, these books showed me how to navigate the world as a black woman. They made me see my own black womanhood as desirable, a feat that Shakespeare, Austen and the Western Literary Canon simply was not up to. My year away from the accepted literary canon set me on a path that has brought me to the counter canon. Ultimately, BWSFF is just a component of a much larger project, the counter-canon. The counter canon is the reaction to the silence of the canon on matters of race, to quote Toni Morrison, "To enforce invisibility through silence is to allow the black cultural body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (Playing in the Dark, 10). As such the works that comprise the counter canon are an act of resistance because they do not allow the silence to continue. This is especially pointed in regard to BWSFF because of SF's enduring history as a white male genre, Octavia Butler was the *first* Black female SF author of note and she began publishing in the 1970s.

Demarcating the genre of BWSFF is a historically interpretive act partially due to the growing civil rights movement of the 2010s that continues through the present moment; the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement and specifically black female leaders being on the forefront of the resistance. The novels of BWSFF populate the bookshelves of such activists. Noname, a black female rapper, includes *Parable of the Sower* as part of her virtual book club reading list. The book club is “dedicated to uplifting POC voices. We do this by highlighting two books each month written by authors of color” Furthermore, the book club operates a Prison Program, through which they send the monthly book picks to incarcerated folks around the country. We believe reading is a critical part of liberation and developing solidarity. The Prison Industrial Complex is working incredibly hard to erase members of our community and we feel we have to work even harder counter this effort (Noname Book Club). The Noname Book Club is indicative of the way that the books of BWSFF become parts of the canon of black identity and resistance as they appear alongside works by Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison.

BWSFF deserves its own demarcation and recognition precisely because the fabric of the genre is tied into activism and radicality. Demarcating the genre says as much about the similarities between the texts themselves as it does their utility to the cultural moment. This is especially important given that authors and works form the counter canon, and specifically BWSFF have begun to be accepted into The Canon. This demarcation preserves the importance of the novels and holds them as separate but equal to their counterparts in The Canon. But the personal aspect of these novels is perhaps more important than their overall cultural significance.

At the end of the day this project is about the gifts passed down from mother to daughter, mentor to student, the knowledge of how to be a black woman. Ultimately, the novels of BWSFF are participating in the same project as Jamaica Kincaid's 1978 short story *Girl*. While *Girl* is explicit and somewhat rigid about handing down knowledge, and how it hands the knowledge down; a list of things to do and a very specific way to be in the world, BWSFF approaches the same project of knowledge preservation with a lighter touch. Instead of offering a specific blueprint of how to exist as a Black woman, BWSFF models different ways of being, how to move forward. To further contextualize my claim that these texts taught me how to be a Black woman means looking at the figures within the novels. Examining the figures that populate these novels is to see individuals who are survivors and who are ultimately facing many of the same ills present outside the fictive space. Racism, Climate Change/Ecological Anxiety, Displacement

The focus on the form of the body in these novels' grounds them in the same physical material condition as those that exist outside the fictive space. But it is the attention to the mind and community that really provide the roadmap for social interaction and values. As such crystalizing these into form and genre is not only a project that recognizes the contributions of the existing work but can solidify them to be used as a jumping off point for future works.

What makes the comparison between Jemisin and Butler so productive is that they address similar issues by way of the same forms, suggesting that both are involved in the same project and though racial progress has been made it is not significant enough to shift the central concerns of the Black Female author or the literary critical eye.

Demarcating BWSFF as a genre provides a path oriented towards future growth, by consolidating, and interacting with the past.

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