

**Afro-Future
Females**

Afro-Future Females

Black Writers

Chart Science Fiction's Newest

New-Wave Trajectory

Edited by

MARLEEN S. BARR



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PREFACE

“All At One Point” Conveys the Point, Period

Or, Black Science Fiction Is Bursting Out All Over

Race, far from being a special or marginal concern, was a central facet of the American story. On the evidence of Ellison's and Morrison's work, it is also a part of the story that defies the tenets of realism, or at least demands that they be combined with elements of allegory, folk tale, Gothic and romance.

—A. O. Scott, “In Search of the Best”

Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory is my third effort in a series that began with *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* (1981, the first scholarly essay collection about women and science fiction). The series inception volume was followed by *Future Females*, *The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism* (2000, the first scholarly essay collection to emphasize the post-baby boom generation of feminist science fiction scholars). *Afro-Future Females* is the first combined science fiction critical anthology and short story collection to focus upon black women via written and visual texts. This anthology, published after the *New York Times Book Review* declared that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* “is the best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years” (Scott 17), emphasizes that the black writers who chart science fiction's newest new-wave trajectory share the enterprise of lauded black great American novelists. Toni Morrison—and the science fiction writers whose stories appear in this volume (Octavia E. Butler, Andrea Hairston, Nalo

Hopkinson, Nisi Shawl, and Sheree R. Thomas)—combine the tenets of realism with elements of allegory, folk tale, Gothic, and romance.

My preface tells a story about the inception of the black science fiction that is currently bursting out all over the science fiction universe.¹ I also emphasize why critics who pinpoint the best American fiction need to look to science fiction—to Harlan Ellison as well as to Ralph Ellison. Or: while a Philip Roth novel is a runner-up to *Beloved* on the *Times*' list and no fewer than four Roth novels are mentioned as recipients of multiple votes, Roth's contemporary, Samuel R. Delany, is an invisible man in relation to the *Times*' search for the best. The point (and I will have a lot to say about points): our late beloved Octavia E. Butler is no invisible woman eclipsed by Toni Morrison's stellar presence. Butler and Morrison, contributors to science fiction's black new wave, bring fantastic black diasporic narrative elements to bear upon denying the tenets of realism.² Both authors write in a manner that adheres to Frank Norris's definition of the great American novel: "Frank Norris wrote that 'the Great American novel is not extinct like the dodo, but mythical like the hippogriff'" (Scott 17). According to A. O. Scott, "the hippogriff, a monstrous hybrid of griffin and horse, is often taken as the very symbol of fantastical impossibility, a unicorn's unicorn" (Scott 17). The hippogriff represents the fact that black science fiction and the great American novel share the same trajectory in that they both center upon fantastical impossibility: *Beloved* is about a ghost, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, another example of how texts categorized as black realistic literature routinely incorporate the fantastic, includes mystical events and the supernatural. Black women science fiction writers focus upon ghosts, mystical events, and the supernatural too. Literary criticism that at once celebrates Morrison and her fellow black mainstream fiction writers while ignoring black science fiction should become as extinct as the dodo. Much of the best mainstream fiction incorporates the fantastic, a unicorn's unicorn. Afro-future female writers transcend ghettoizing generic classification; they join the best American writers in creating work that combines mainstream literature with science fiction and fantasy.

▮ I. The Revenge of the Hippogriffs

Or, Black Science Fiction Writers Did Not
Create Godzilla

A science fiction writer walks into a bookstore. "Do you have a black science fiction anthology?" she asks. The flummoxed clerk experiences

a Eureka! moment. “No. No black science fiction anthology. But not to worry. We carry *The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*.”

I intend no *sh*tick*. Sheree R. Thomas is the science fiction writer who walked into the bookstore. Her idea to create the *Dark Matter* anthologies emanated from the anecdote I have related.³ *Dark Matter*, the definitive science fiction anthologies of the new millennium, follow such representative anthologies for their time as Harlan Ellison’s *Dangerous Visions*, Pamela Sargent’s *Women of Wonder*, Bruce Sterling’s *Mirrorshades*, and Larry McCaffery’s *Storming the Reality Studio*. The bookstore clerk’s response makes the need for black science fiction anthologies patently obvious.

It was not ludicrous for the clerk to respond to Thomas’s request by equating black science fiction with Japanese science fiction: the two are not completely devoid of connection and can mutually illuminate each other. Karen Tei Yamashita, for example, writes fiction about Japanese Brazilians. Her *Circle K Cycles* concerns the second-class treatment Brazilian Japanese people receive when they immigrate to Japan. There is absolutely no biological difference between people born to Japanese parents in Brazil and people born to Japanese parents in Tokyo. It is nonsensical for Japanese to discriminate against those who are biologically identical to them. So, too, it is nonsensical for the literary establishment to discriminate against the black women’s science fiction that is generically identical to Morrison’s revered *Beloved*. With Yamashita’s unusual multicultural perspective and the cross-cultural catalyst that generated *Dark Matter* in mind, I am quite comfortable using an Italian male writer’s short story to serve as a central metaphor to pinpoint a black science fiction anthology.

▮ II. Italo Calvino and the Point, Period

Period.

I do not evoke the finality of the grammatical period in terms of Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*. Instead, I refer to the inceptions Edward Said addresses in *Beginnings*. Look at a period: . A period printed on a page resembles a planet backgrounded by white space vastness. The black period situated amidst the page’s white space can represent the science fiction generic white authorship space which has functioned as a void in relation to black science fiction. Thomas’s encounter with the clerk exemplifies exactly why, until recently, black authors’ presence on the science fiction radar screen (with the exception of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler, of course) was aptly described by Isak Dinesen’s title “The Blank Page.” The period, the literal black densely filled-in circle, the figurative

planet placed on the white outer space page, has lately reached a tipping point: the plethora of new black science fiction writers existing within the period are bursting out all over to become the newest new-wave trajectory of early-twenty-first-century science fiction.

Walter Mosley refers to the writer ensconced at the center of the black period/planet: “Mr. Delany is it. He is the *center*. He is one of our most amazing writers and thinkers. You’re sitting in a room with one of the greatest men in American literature. *Period*” (Mosley, Conference, italics mine). Take heed, *New York Times Book Review*. Delany responds to Mosley in terms of my dark matter period/planet metaphor: “I was the only dark *spot* in the mix when I came into the largely Jewish liberal science fiction community. At one point you have to decide I’m going to do what I’m going to do. I can write it [science fiction] too” (Delany, Conference, italics mine). Delany is no longer America’s lone black science fiction writer. Many more dark spots presently figure in the science fiction mix. Black science fiction writers are now converged all at “one point,” the inception point of an exploding black science fiction presence that is newly positioned to become science fiction’s most exciting new direction. The center cannot hold: the period/planet will expand and fill the surrounding white space/page.

Hélène Cixous characterized *écriture féminine* as the feminist literary texts that metaphorically replace black ink with white mothers’ milk. Black science fiction writers create science fiction *écriture noire*; women and men use black ink to burst forth from the black/period planet and fill the space of the white page. Science fiction *écriture noire* is poised to eclipse the white page space that the science fiction publishing universe occupies. Delany says that you “learn about life from what is written on the page” (Delany, Conference). Using black ink, black science fiction writers create texts that reflect their lives, lives which center on the color black. Color black science fiction, science fiction *écriture noire*, fulfills Thomas’s request: “I wanted to see my community reflected in a future I could live in” (Thomas, Conference).

Thomas calls for more room for black science fiction—rooms of black science fiction writers’ own—more black science fiction black ink to fill white pages’ white futures. Her point manifests itself in terms of Italo Calvino’s “All At One Point.” Calvino’s story describes how the single point which contains everything and everyone creates the entire universe—the future—when it expands. So too for black science fiction. My point is that “All At One Point” can be read as a parable of black science fiction’s explosive development. Thomas could comfortably inhabit the futures that emanate when the contained single point of the black science fiction period/planet explodes in the science fiction world.

Calvino imagines that the single point containing all the matter in the universe is populated: “[W]e were all there . . . where else could we have been? Nobody knew then that there could be space” (Calvino 43). In terms of black science fiction history, “then” is the time before the point first began to expand, the time before Delany entered the white science fiction coterie. Pre-Delany, few critics noticed black science fiction. The “we” who are all there in the point Calvino describes includes Mrs. Ph(i)NKo, the Italian mother whose articulated wish to cook noodles is the catalyst that starts the universe’s expansion. Another woman is also present: “a cleaning woman— ‘maintenance staff’ she was called . . . she spent all her time gossiping and complaining” (Calvino 43–44). Mrs. Ph(i)NKo is the most important character in Calvino’s story. It is the cleaning woman, however, who is the integral personality in relation to the story of black science fiction’s inception— and, taking historical American race relations into account, a present-day American reader encountering a mid-twentieth-century story could justifiably construe the cleaning woman as being black. When the cleaning woman gossips, she might speak in the black female voice. When she complains, she might rail against the fact that comments about “immigrants” and the “unfounded prejudice” directed against them in “All At One Point” do not include the blacks who are most certainly also contained within the point. (Blacks, after all, first traveled intercontinentally as slaves, not as immigrants.) Calvino’s narrator says that he is not convinced that the universe which emanated from a single point will ever be “condensed again” (Calvino 45). “Unfounded prejudice” would be a part of the alleged new all-at-one-point in that one of its former inhabitants says, “[T]he thing we have to make sure of is, this time, certain people remain out” (Calvino 45).

The condensed and about-to-burst science fiction point, a corrective to this prejudice, consists of particular people, black science fiction writers, who are the genre’s new “in” group. Calvino’s character who expresses unfounded prejudice against immigrants is “turning purple” when he contemplates being reunited with Mrs. Ph(i)NKo (Calvino 45). The color purple and Mrs. Ph(i)NKo are not the point vis-à-vis the recondensed science fiction universe. The point is that the cleaning woman’s gossiping and complaining, the language of someone who might be a black woman, is the discourse that acts as a catalyst to science fiction’s new expansion. “It was the cleaning woman who always started the slander” (Calvino 46). Perhaps she speaks out against unfounded prejudice, the point that Mrs. Ph(i)NKo who “welcomed us and loved and inhabited all equally” begins the universe when she says, “I’d like to make some noodles for you boys!” (Calvino 46).

I read “you boys” as white boys. When the cleaning woman speaks as I imagine she would and the science fiction universe expands again, she might make it clear that “every nebula, every sun, every planet” (Calvino

47) is, in addition to being white boys' real estate, an appropriate space for all black people in particular and all people in general. She might make it clear that the point—the black period/planet emanation point—expands to accommodate the black science fiction literature that ensconces black culture on every nebula, every sun, every planet. At the end of “All At One Point,” Mrs. Ph(i)NKO is lost, “scattered through the continents of the planets” (Calvino 47). She is lost among the continents of the planets imagined by science fiction writers whose roots emanate from white Europe. Calvino's protagonists are “mourning her loss” (Calvino 47). The purpose of *Afro-Future Females* is to celebrate the fact that the black mother who is responsible for science fiction's new expansion has been found. Delany is no longer alone. “I'd like to make some plantains for you sistahs and boyz,” I imagine her saying as science fiction's newest new-wave trajectory is born.

“Think about what exists. Black people can't have fiction without science fiction. Science fiction takes us away from the world which is so oppressive,” says Mosley (Conference).

That is the point.

Period.

▶ III. Science Fiction Will Overcome

The central point of *Afro-Future Females* is that black women impact upon science fiction as authors, protagonists, actresses, and editors. I wish to create a dialogue with existing theories of Afro-Futurism in order to generate fresh ideas about how to apply race to science fiction studies in terms of gender. *Afro-Future Females* at once applies Afro-Futurism to written and visual texts and offers something very different from existing scholarship. The volume's contributors expand Mark Dery's masculinist foundation for our understanding of Afro-Futurism by explaining how to formulate a woman-centered Afro-Futurism. Their essays and stories present a valuable argument concerned with repositioning previously excluded fiction to redefine science fiction as a broader fantastic endeavor. These texts can be used as a platform for scholars to mount a vigorous argument in favor of redefining science fiction to encompass varieties of fantastic writing and, therefore, to include a range of black women's writing that would otherwise be excluded.⁴ The anthology's umbrella approach is not new in that it has for a long time been reflected by “speculative fiction” and by Eric S. Rabkin's notion of a “super genre.”⁵ While presenting a complex method to redefine “science fiction” is certainly beyond the purview of this preface, I note that my term “feminist fabulation”⁶ encompasses black women's science fiction. The big-tent rubric figures in this collection's central argument which goes

beyond the point that marginalized texts and authors have been excluded from the itself-marginalized science fiction genre. Instead, I emphasize that it is necessary to revise the very nature of a genre that has been constructed in such a way as to exclude its new black participants. It is necessary to rethink “science fiction” in light of Afro-Futurist fiction.

For example, the stories by Octavia E. Butler, Andrea Hairston, Nisi Shawl, Sheree R. Thomas, and Nalo Hopkinson which I have included collectively indicate the ways in which science fiction should be reconceptualized. Traditional constructions of science fiction have divided the genre into a fantastic continuum that often excludes fantasy, women, and people of color. The claim that black people do not write science fiction is dependent upon defining science fiction as texts that black people do not write. Expanding “science fiction” to include written and visual Afro-Futuristic imaginative visions changes the dynamic in which science fiction is always defined as inferior to mainstream realistic literature.⁷

For this change to occur—in order to end the marginalization of science fiction which relentlessly relegates the genre to subliterary status—it is necessary to define the broad fantastic tendency in Afro-Futurist texts as science fiction. In their contributions to this volume, Madhu Dubey and DeWitt Douglas Kilgore describe a new enlarged fantastic tendency. Kilgore points to the intermingling of fantasy, time, and history:

I see their work [stories written by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tangh] as part of a feminist tradition in African-American literature that imaginatively engages mythic and historical pasts in order to describe livable futures. These pasts have been visible but marginal in relation to Anglo-American science fiction and fantasy. I argue that Okorafor, Shawl, and Tangh bring these pasts into contact with the conventions and expectations fantastic literature fosters. Having no desire to erase the reading pleasures associated with speculative fiction, these authors use story telling conventions inherited from the Anglo-American literary tradition in unintended ways. The writers venture beyond merely moving black female characters and their histories into previously white and male precincts to create “diverse” versions of familiar tales. Instead, they directly engage genre conventions to change what and how we read. Thus, fantastic literature’s resources are used to tell stories that have been impossible to imagine.

Black science fiction writers alter genre conventions to change how we read and define science fiction itself.

Dubey explains why previously impossible-to-imagine female Afro-Futurist stories emerge when black-centered fantasy interrogates “normal”

science fiction premises. She discusses “magical modes of knowing and being that supplement and often override the principles of reason.” Dubey continues: “The critique of scientific rationality forms such a strong impelling force in the fledgling field of black-authored science fiction as to almost warrant the term ‘black anti-science fiction.’ In science fiction novels by black men and women writers . . . scientific practice is relentlessly indicted for its predatory exploitation of black bodies and scientific theory for validating claims of black racial inferiority. Afro-diasporic systems of knowledge and belief, such as vodun, obeah, or Santeria, are consistently shown to confound and triumph over scientific reason.” Dubey describes juxtaposing fantasies involving Afro-diasporic knowledge and belief systems with anti-science fiction. Anti-science fiction is science fiction imbued with black diasporic versions of fantasy, that is, fantasy-centered science fiction which includes such despised unrealistic tropes as dreams and magic. Anti-science fiction is black science fiction/fantasy—writing that falls under the auspices of feminist fabulation. *Beloved* is written in this vein. Recognizing that black science fiction writers combine science fiction with fantasy once and for all ends the tiresome debates about the differences between the definitions of science fiction and fantasy that once pervaded science fiction critical discourse. Black science fiction/fantasy is a new new-wave trajectory effective force. This force is with the science fiction critical empire when it strikes back against being relentlessly branded with the “C” word—and what I mean by the “C” word will become immediately clear. It is thankfully socially impossible currently to use racial epithets publicly and formally in American society. I wish the same for the “C” word as it is routinely used in the following pervasive elitist sentiment: “science fiction is crap.”⁸

I read Dubey (in her contribution to this volume) as providing instructions about how to do things with words to end discrimination against science fiction. She clearly states that black women’s science fiction and black women’s mainstream literature are one and the same: the “resonance between [Nalo] Hopkinson and Morrison suggests that what is recently being marketed as the newly emergent phenomenon of black women’s science fiction shares common generic traits with ‘mundane’ or ‘mainstream’ black women’s novels such as Morrison’s own *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, or *Tar Baby*, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo*, and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, to name just a few.” Dubey continues: “In its casual incorporation of magical and supernatural phenomena and its flouting of the norms of realism and rational explication, mundane as well as speculative fiction by black women writers can be said to exemplify the ‘counterculture of modernity’ that Paul Gilroy considers to be distinctive of Afro-diasporic culture.” If black women’s mainstream

literature and black women's science fiction belong to the same genre just as surely as the Martians and the Earthlings depicted in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* belong to the same species, then—as *Star Trek*'s Vulcan Mr. Spock would say—discriminating against science fiction is illogical.

In terms of the female Afro-Futurism Dubey describes, applying the “C” word to science fiction generates the following logical imagined elitist critical conclusion: some literature created by Toni Morrison is crap. Why can the critics who routinely discriminate against science fiction texts apply the word “crap” to examples of Morrison's work? The answer: Morrison includes science fiction tropes in some of her writing. (If all science fiction is allegedly crap, then the science fictional aspects of Morrison's work must also logically be categorized as crap too.) To exemplify the notion that Morrison's work contains science fiction tropes, my introduction to *Future Females, The Next Generation* (Barr 2000, 1–2) explains that the feminist utopia Morrison depicts in *Paradise* is akin to the feminist utopias female science fiction writers envision. Equating “crap” with the science fictional elements present in the work of one of America's greatest living writers is as professionally impossible as publicly uttering racist language. Once and for all and finally, it is necessary to understand that the following knee-jerk literary critical assertion is absolutely illogical: if it is good, it can't be science fiction; and if it is science fiction, it can't be good. (This thinking led to the erroneous and irrational conclusion that Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, a great American novel whose extraterrestrial protagonists hail from the planet Tralfamadore, is something other than science fiction. To the misguided critics who deny that *Slaughterhouse Five* is science fiction I say this: if it looks like an extraterrestrial and it quacks—or communicates in some other nonhuman manner—like an extraterrestrial, then it *is* science fiction. I note too that Philip Roth's lauded *The Plot against America* is a science fiction alternative history story.)

Dubey further explains that “Afro-diasporic and feminist writers of speculative and science fiction deploy magic in strikingly convergent ways, to reevaluate a whole set of gendered and racialized dichotomies that have helped to prop up the subject of modern science.” In other words, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tananarive Due, for example, produce female-centered Afro-Futurist texts; female-centered Afro-Futurist texts are part of science fiction's newest new wave, the Afro-diasporic, fantasy-infused, magic-centered science fiction I have described. Science fiction is rescued from discrimination when science fiction parameters are expanded to nullify the claim that black people do not write science fiction. Ditto for the false assertion that great American writers such as Morrison and Roth create purely realistic work that is devoid of science fiction tropes.

In addition to my aforementioned point about the similarity between the feminist utopia that Morrison depicts in *Paradise* and the feminist utopias that appear in science fiction, I have said that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a science fiction time travel novel and that Ursula K. Le Guin should be recognized as the Virginia Woolf of our time.⁹ I now situate Octavia E. Butler at the productive intersection of the intermingling between science fiction and Afro-diasporic fantasy I describe above. She participated at once in female Afro-Futurism fantasy and in conventional American genre science fiction traditions. Butler's *Kindred* is the time travel great American novel descendant of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *Orlando*. No crap-producing, marginalized, science fiction genre writer, Octavia E. Butler is absolutely the equal of Toni Morrison.

That is the point.

Period.

IV. Fantastic Voyage

What Lies Within

Afro-Future Females is divided into four sections: introductions, essays, stories, and commentaries. This is what lies within the sections:

Introductions

Hortense J. Spillers' "Imaginative Encounters" ponders the real and the imaginative, the juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange, in terms of black women writers' science fiction. In order to foster the needed interchange between black studies scholars and science fiction studies scholars, it is exceedingly important for one of the most noteworthy theorists of black feminism to address herself to black science fiction.

Mark Dery's "Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0" launched the discourse of Afro-Futurism. The piece appears here accompanied by a new explanatory note.

Marleen S. Barr, in "'On the Other Side of the Glass': The Television Roots of Black Science Fiction," argues that from the 1960s to the 1990s, television served as a remedial education program that mitigated against racism in the form of a temporal progression. I announce that black television stars are the mothers and fathers of black science fiction. My purpose is to explain how television laid the groundwork for the twenty-first-century outpouring of black science fiction.

Essays

Madhu Dubey, in “Becoming Animal in Black Women’s Science Fiction,” examines the device of women becoming animals in Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*. Dubey stresses that Butler and Hopkinson depict women changing into animals to critique scientific rationality, to “defamiliarize the modern Western discourse of the human.”

Ellen Peel, in “God Is Change: Persuasion and Pragmatic Utopianism in Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed* Novels,” draws upon her *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction* to approach the *Earthseed* novels by questioning the nature of persuasion. Peel states that “since the *Earthseed* series tells the story of a movement both utopian and religious, these novels are also about persuasion.”

Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan, in “Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson Revisit the Reproduction of Mothering: Legacies of the Past and Strategies for the Future,” argues that it is necessary to focus upon the American black woman’s fraught relationship to her self and to the symbolic perpetuation of her self—her daughters. Rogan explores the theme of the racialized “reproduction of mothering” in Tananarive Due’s “Like Daughter” and in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*. She brings the work of various theorists (such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Hortense J. Spillers, Gayatri Spivak, and Angela Davis) to bear upon this theme.

Jennifer E. Henton, in “Close Encounters between Traditional and Nontraditional Science Fiction: Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* Sing the Time Travel Blues,” undertakes a twofold objective: she describes a new conception of science fiction which allows the genre to include Other voices, and she exemplifies this inclusiveness by reading *Kindred* in terms of *Corregidora* being newly defined as science fiction. Henton establishes that both Butler and Jones are science fiction ladies who sing the time travel blues when she makes it “possible for a black woman’s traditionally science fictional text to closely encounter a black woman’s text which has never before boldly gone within genre science fiction.”

De Witt Douglas Kilgore, in “Beyond the History We Know: Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tanghai Rethink Science Fiction Tradition,” focuses upon the experimental tradition of emerging writers, a strategy that “helps [to] reveal the rich play of influences, conversations and movements that are remaking contemporary science fiction and fantasy.” Kilgore points out that these emerging writers bring African-American mythic and historic pasts to bear upon fantastic literature conventions. The three writers Kilgore discusses respond to his ideas in the following

pieces: Shaw's "Bubbling Champagne Power Trip," Okorafor-Mbachu's "Of Course People Can Fly," and Tangh's "Carla Johnson/Jarla Tangh: A Close Encounter with My Pseudonym."

Stories

Afro-Future Females includes five short stories that exemplify exactly how black women are boldly going into science fiction: Octavia E. Butler's "The Book of Martha," Andrea Hairston's "Double Consciousness," Nisi Shawl's "Dynamo Hum," Sheree R. Thomas's "The Ferryman," and Nalo Hopkinson's "Herbal."

Commentaries

Of course, no one would question why an anthology devoted to black women and science fiction includes science fiction written by black women. But not so for the commentaries Steven Barnes, Samuel R. Delany, and Kevin Willmott contribute: Barnes's "Can a Brother Get Some Love? Sociobiology in Images of African-American Sensuality in Contemporary Cinema: Or, Why We'd Better the Hell Claim Vin Diesel as Our Own"; an interview with Delany conducted by Carl Freedman, "A Conversation with Samuel R. Delany about Sex, Race, Writing—and Science Fiction"; and "Black 'Science Faction': An Interview with Kevin Willmott, Director and Writer of *CSA, The Confederate States of America*," an interview that I undertook. What are such nice male science fiction practitioners doing in an anthology like this—an anthology that focuses upon women? They discuss real women, imagined women, and sex and gender issues. To honor Butler, I frame the commentary section with pieces representative of the established writers and emerging talents who continue her legacy: Due's "On Octavia E. Butler," and the younger Okorafor-Mbachu's "Octavia's Healing Power: A Tribute to the Late Great Octavia E. Butler."

Finally, I include a personal afterword, "The Big Bang: Or, the Inception of Scholarship about Black Women Science Fiction Writers." Ruth Salvaggio, who participated in the events my afterword describes, offers her response, "Connecting Metamorphoses: Italo Calvino's Mrs. Ph(i)NKO and I, Dr. Ph(d)SalvagIo."

Since the issue of who is authorized to speak about particular writers, and which writers should be included in the conversation, is vexed and troubling, I want briefly and directly to address it. Scholarly considerations of black science fiction must include Delany. (Delany, the author of *Triton*, is,

after all, a feminist science fiction writer.) Hence, men contribute to this anthology about black women's science fiction. I took care to include scholars and writers who are well-known, as well as those who are at the inception of their careers. *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* celebrates the flowering, the burgeoning, the expansion of the newly born black female science fiction universe.

That is the point.

Period.

► V. Postscript: Future Afro-Future Female (and Male) Award Winners

Or, the Imagined Triumph of the Hippogriffs

A. O. Scott says that “the thing about mythical beasts is they don’t go extinct; they evolve. The best American fiction of the past 25 years is concerned . . . with sorting out the past, which may be its way of clearing ground for the literature of the future. So let me end with a message to all you aspiring hippogriff breeders out there: 2030 is just around the corner. Get to work” (Scott 19).

So let me end with a hopeful message about science fiction’s future in relation to mainstream literature.

Scott’s year 2030 is presently a science fiction projection. The presence of the science fictional 2030 in Scott’s text means that science fiction, the “literature of the future,” appears in the *New York Times*’ search for the best American fiction after all! Today’s hippogriff breeders—the recently established black science fiction writers and the emerging talents who follow them—sort out their historical past in order to generate the literature of the future. Once upon a future time, in Scott’s 2030, for example, I hope that today’s new science fiction writers will win prizes for writing the best American fiction. I also hope that Samuel R. Delany wins a major literary award well before 2030.

► VI. Post-Postscript: Back to the Future

Butler was once described as “one of the finest voices in fiction—*period*” [italics mine] by *The Washington Post* (Lamb 8).

The point: black science fiction is the most exciting literature of the twenty-first-century present.

Period.

Notes

1. I wish to call attention to my use of the word “story” in this sentence. Please know that I am concerned about the fact that literary criticism distances itself from readers to the extent that some university presses are refusing to publish it. To assuage this situation, building upon my work as a pioneering feminist science fiction critic and an emerging fiction writer, I am now turning my hand toward pioneering a new critical writing style. Hence, in the manner of Maureen Dowd’s *New York Times* editorial page columns, I am very purposefully writing this preface in an unorthodox mode. Many people did not welcome feminist science fiction criticism, and I am fully aware that not everyone will welcome the critical writing style I advocate. I hope that those who do not concur with me will at least be open to the creation of a space for new forms of critical expression. For another example of how “story” figures in my critical writing, see Marleen S. Barr, “Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation,” *PMLA*, May 2004, 429–41.

2. Similar points were raised at Wiscon 30 (May 26–29, 2006), the feminist science fiction conference held in Madison, Wisconsin. The following is the program description for a panel called “Tearing Down the Walls and Windows” whose participants were Claire Light, Candra K. Gill, Ian K. Hagemann, Diantha Day Sprouse, and Sheree R. Thomas: “People sometimes ask ‘Why don’t people of color write speculative fiction?’ ‘We do,’ says Nalo Hopkinson, ‘but it’s unlikely that you’ll find it on the SF shelves in your bookstores.’ Why don’t genre readers recognize novels such as Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* or Devorah Major’s *An Open Weave* as belonging to our own? Why does even a writer as solidly genre-identified as Octavia Butler find most of her fans from elsewhere?”

3. Thomas related this anecdote to me. She also referred to it at the 2006 National Black Writers Conference.

4. Jennifer E. Henton’s contribution to this volume exemplifies one method of how to frame this in-depth argument. Please know that in my capacity as editor, I helped to generate her essay’s topic and structure. Hence, rather than including a complex critical argument that would repeat the intention of Henton’s essay, I instead elect to have my preface focus upon a creative analogy involving Calvino’s “All At One Point.”

5. See Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.

6. See Marleen S. Barr, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.

7. I am grateful to this volume’s anonymous outside readers who helped me to formulate the points I make at the start of this section.

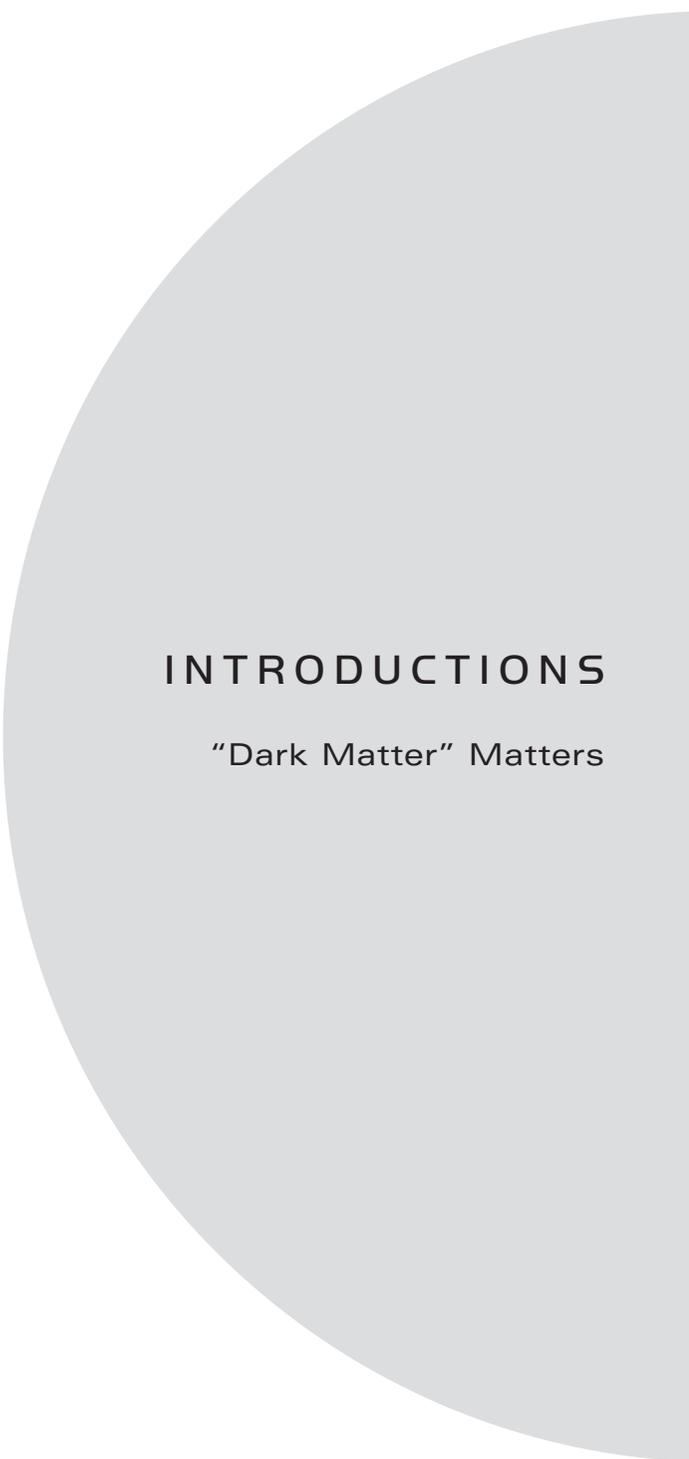
8. The word “crap” resonates strongly within the science fiction community. When defending the genre against elitist critics, science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon famously said “95 percent of science fiction is crap . . . but then, 95 percent of everything is crap.” For a science fiction critic who satirically comments upon the pervasiveness of using “crap” to describe science fiction, see Eric S. Rabkin, “What Was Science Fiction?” *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium*. Ed. Marleen S. Barr. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003. 191–98.

9. See Marleen S. Barr, "Searoad Chronicles of Klatsand as a Pathway toward New Directions in Feminist Science Fiction: Or, Who's Afraid of Connecting Ursula Le Guin to Virginia Woolf?" *Foundation* (Spring 1994): 58–67.

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INTRODUCTIONS

“Dark Matter” Matters

Imaginative Encounters

On 20 July 1969, *Apollo 11* successfully landed Neil Armstrong on the surface of the moon; to that moment, “the site of humankind’s only manned exploration of another celestial body” (Parrett 1), this achievement arguably rendered wishing on the moon moribund. Now that going to the moon no longer counted as a patent impossibility, the figurative dimension suddenly shifted into the literal, and the act of imagination that had fired the engines of poets and songwriters and graced the most youthful eroticisms with the stuff of myth and dreaming now belonged to the precincts of the engineer and the computer specialist. But there is every reason to believe that the moon landing, as well as space exploration more generally, owes its fruition as much to poetry and the range of the imaginative arts as to the initiatives of science and technology; in short, the imitation of art by the real world is not usually the way we think it goes, but it must be so, according to the dynamic dance of mimesis that Oscar Wilde celebrates in the “Decay of Lying” (970–93). We might describe it this way: the writings of the imaginative artist, among which the “extraterrestrial” prominently figures—one scholar calls them the “translunar narrative”—deposit traces that the thickest empiricisms may well translate into products after their own encodings. To this ancient tradition of symbol-making, running back over the centuries, black women writers continue to make significant contributions.

The realm of the extraterrestrial, or the entire gamut of fictions that pose alternative models of reality, including the fictions of science,

magic, and the fantastical, might be thought to have something of a prohibitive relationship to certain historical formations. Put another way, certain historical formations that arise in the world of *realpolitik* bear a critical relationship, one might well believe, to literary realism; if the latter defines narrative strategy and modes of characterization according to mimetically vivid and verifiable principles, engendered by the real world of power relations, then realism would seem to match up well with its origins in the problematic of the everyday. By this logic, African-American literary development would locate its center of gravity in realism. But if there is more than one way “to make it real,” then the work of fantasy and make-believe has a genuine role to play in processes of social construction and identity formation.

Among black women writers in the genre of science fiction, Octavia E. Butler has created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models; in that regard, science fiction puts into play something that we know, that is rather familiar, while it so rearranges the signposts that the outcome is strange and defamiliarized. The melding of the familiar and the strange is not only the essence of the marvelous, but the very ground of the uncanny, which returns us to what we know in a way that we had not known and experienced before. Butler’s fictional projects in the reterritorializations and displacements of realism’s objects trace back to the 1970s and her “Patternist” series that immerses the reader in the cosmos of the immortal and hermaphroditic Doro, encompassing *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay’s Ark* (1984) (Gates and McKay 2515–29). Butler’s “Xenogenesis” series that tells the story of a new Lilith (Iyapo) takes us across the ’80s decade of the writer’s career and includes *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*; perhaps the writer’s best-known novel, *Kindred* (1988), belongs to the same period, as it reverses the logic of futurism and time travel by taking us backward in time, or, more precisely, back to the future. From the ’90s, Butler’s Lauren Olamina transports us deep inside the twenty-first century by way of *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*. On the basis of this substantial, single-authored canon, Octavia E. Butler most certainly inhabits a central chapter of a revised African-American literary history, alongside a sustained reassessment of the powers of the uncanny.

When Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, finds herself on a path of reentry onto slavery’s old ground, she and the reader make the one return journey that they have both determined is the most dreadful event that the mind could conjure up and that the body, in utter recoil to terror, shudders

in the very act of imagining. Not only does one try to think that such an occurrence is impossible, and to rest assured in that impossibility—after all, there is that fragile membrane-moment that we like to call the Constitution—but one also wants to believe that the thought itself is, paradoxically, *unthinkable*. That Butler indeed *thought* it, plucking this contemporary character out of a world that parallels our own and from the nesting place of an interracial marriage, inscribes the most daring of fictional moves with a result that is profoundly disturbing: if fictional time lays claim to plasticity, then it can retrogress as well as progress. In this case, Dana's return demarcates a proleptic leap, insofar as she must go back in order to give birth to her ancestors and, thus, to someone called Dana, which violent act of parturition will tear her arm off when she eventually makes it back to the novel's diegetic time frame. We have no fiction quite like it in joining so terrible a historical contingency to the canons of the magical; *Kindred* is also rare in its refusal of a unidirectional concept of time and the inevitability of progress. We do not want to know that the cost of our being here has been inestimable and that the way to our current peace swims in blood and the truncated bodies of the violent dead. Forced from our slumber of feigned innocence, we awaken here to full consciousness and its blasts of discomfort. In this instance, we have seen the future that is represented from one of its angles—the terrible past—and it is a cautionary tale that we dare not disbelieve. This volume of criticism on science fiction with its brilliant new stars opens a path here to considerations of other worlds that illuminate the one we now so uncertainly inhabit.

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Black to the Future

Afro-Futurism 1.0

“Black to the Future” was originally written for *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Duke University Press, 1994), an anthology I edited. Arguably the first serious scholarly inquiry into digital culture, *Flame Wars* grappled with feminist and Afrocentric issues at a time when the alt.geek underground was A Guy Thing—more precisely, A White Guy Thing. Its aspirational bibles were the upwardly mobile *Wired* and its cyberslacker cousin, *Mondo 2000*: its natural habit the rave, the videogame console, and the virtual realities dreamed up by the novelist William Gibson and coded into being by the hacker Jaron Lanier. In the largely uninhabited vastness of cyberspace, a few colonists were founding subcultural enclaves, but the Net was still a terra simulacrum to most, marooned unawares in the Desert of the Real.

The introduction to a suite of interviews (with the African-American SF novelist Samuel R. Delany, professor of Africana Studies Tricia Rose, and cultural critic Greg Tate), “Black to the Future” launched the discourse of Afro-Futurism. I minted the term to describe African-American culture’s appropriation of technology and SF imagery—this at a moment when *Wired* was lambasted for featuring nothing but white guys on its covers. As the prominent cultural theorist Ron Eglash confirms, in “The Race for Cyberspace: Information Technology in the Black Diaspora” (<http://www.rpi.edu/~eglash/eglash.dir/ethnic.dir/r4cyb.dir/r4cybh.htm>), “Mark Dery (1994) coined the term . . . to describe the self-conscious appropriation of technological themes in black popular culture, particularly that of rap and other hip-hop representations.”

At last count, a Google search for “Afro-Futurism” racked up 1,500

hits. A burgeoning field of study, it has inspired a website (<http://www.Afro-Futurism.net/>); a members-only Yahoo discussion group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Afro-Futurism>); a Hypertext project (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/english/English295/carroll/gateway.html>); and critical anthologies such as *Race in Cyberspace*, *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* and a special issue of the journal *Social Text*, titled, unsurprisingly, *Afro-Futurism*.

A decade on, Gibsonian visions of disenfranchised “Lo-Teks” and “orbital rastas” ripping off the Empire’s brutally cool hardware and refunctioning it into weapons of mass resistance make a tinny irony when clanged against the everyday ugliness of the twenty-first century. Yesterday’s cyberpunk bricoleurs are today’s “entrepreneurial” jihadi, to use Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security Christopher Cox’s term of art. Selecting their victims from multiple options in a target-rich environment, they improvise their ordnance from the innocuous stuff of consumer culture, turning cars into bombs, jetliners into missiles, and junk mail into booby traps rigged with anthrax or exploding match-heads. Fast, cheap, and out of control, the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) wreaking havoc in Iraq as this is written are a sign of our times. Third-world insurgents sow the wind with first-world scrap, killing and maiming U.S. troops and private contractors with the trickledown products of American industry. “Highly sophisticated IEDs have been constructed from arming devices scavenged from conventional munitions and easily purchased electronic components, as well as consumer devices such as mobile phones,” notes the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. “The degree of sophistication depends on the ingenuity of the designer and the tools and materials available.” These are ad-hoc horrors, jury-rigged nightmares that make a mockery of cyberpunk fantasies, with their earnest, late-night dorm-room talk of appropriated technologies and “sites of resistance”—Islands in the Net, to use the SF novelist Bruce Sterling’s patented phrase. Is there a place, in these days of Terrorist Futures and Total Information Awareness, for a naïve faith in guerrilla semiotics—the “deconstructionist ability to crack complex cultural codes”? In a time of human bombs and ad campaigns for the unspeakable (videotaped atrocities, with postproduction effects), such phrases sound like the litany of a forgotten religion, a millennial cult whose end days never came.

► Afro-Futurism 1.0

[I]f all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. “Who controls the past,” ran the Party slogan, “controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”

—George Orwell

There is nothing more galvanizing than the sense of a cultural past.

—Alain Locke

Yo, bust this, Black
 To the Future
 Back to the past
 History is a mystery 'cause it has
 All the info
 You need to know
 Where you're from
 Why'd you come and
 That'll tell you where you're going
 —Def Jef

Hack this: Why do so few African-Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other—the stranger in a strange land—would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists? Yet, to my knowledge, only Samuel R. Delany, Octavia E. Butler, Steven Barnes, and Charles Saunders have chosen to write within the genre conventions of SF. This is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees. They inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or tasers, is too often brought to bear upon black bodies.

Moreover, the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history—in which context William Gibson's observation that SF is widely known as “the golden ghetto,” in recognition of the negative correlation between the genre's market share and its critical legitimation, takes on a curious significance. So, too, does Norman Spinrad's glib use of the phrase “token nigger” to describe “any science fiction writer of merit who is adopted . . . in the grand salons of literary power.”

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-Futurism. The notion of Afro-Futurism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, don't the technocrats, SF writers, futurologists,

set designers, and streamliners—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies already have a lock on that unreal estate? Samuel R. Delany has suggested that “the flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction” have historically functioned as “social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, ‘Boys’ Club! Girls, keep out. Black and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!’” What Gibson has termed the “semiotic ghosts” of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*; Frank R. Paul’s illustrations for Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*; the chromium-skinned, teardrop-shaped household appliances dreamed up by Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss; Norman Bel Geddes’s *Futurama* at the 1939 New York World’s Fair; and Disney’s Tomorrowland all still haunt the public mind, in one guise or another.

But African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come. If there is an Afro-Futurism, it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points. We catch a glimpse of it in the opening pages of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, where the proto-cyberpunk protagonist—a techno-bricoleur “in the great American tradition of tinkerers”—taps illegal juice from a line owned by the rapacious Monopolated Light & Power, gloating, “Oh, they suspect that their power is being drained off, but they don’t know where.” One day, perhaps, he’ll indulge his fantasy of playing five recordings of Louis Armstrong’s version of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue” at once, in a sonic Romare Bearden collage (an unwittingly prescient vision, on Ellison’s part, of that 1981 masterpiece of deconstructionist deejaying, “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel”). Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings such as *Molasses*, which features a pie-eyed, snaggletoothed robot, adequately earn the term “Afro-Futurist,” as do movies like John Sayles’s *The Brother from Another Planet* and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames*. Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland* is Afro-Futurist; so, too, is the techno-tribal global village music of Miles Davis’s *On the Corner* and Herbie Hancock’s *Headhunters*, as well as the fusion-jazz cyberfunk of Hancock’s *Future Shock* and Bernie Worrell’s *Blacktronic Science*, whose liner notes herald “reports and manifestoes from the nether regions of the modern Afrikan American music/speculative fiction universe.” Afro-Futurism manifests itself, too, in early ’80s electro-boogie releases such as Planet Patrol’s “Play at Your Own Risk,” Warp 9’s “Nunk,” George Clinton’s “Computer Games,” and, of course, Afrika Bambaataa’s classic “Planet Rock,” records steeped in “imagery drawn from computer games, video, cartoons, sci-fi and hip-hop slanguage,” notes David Toop, who calls them “a soundtrack for vidkids to live out fantasies born of a science-fiction revival courtesy of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.”

Techno, whose name was purportedly inspired by a reference to “techno rebels” in Alvin Toffler’s *Third Wave*, is a quintessential example of Afro-Futurism. The genre was jump-started in the Orwellian year of 1984 in Detroit, appropriately enough, a city equally famous for Motown and the mechanical ballets of its spot-welding robots. The Ur-tune “Techno City” was hacked together by Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May, a band of button-pushers who went by the name Cybotron. Matthew Collin notes that their worldview was “shaped by playing video games, by watching Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, and by the idea of a new computer world replacing industrial society as framed in both Kraftwerk’s records and futurologist Alvin Toffler’s book *The Third Wave*.” According to Collin, the portentous chords and robotic clangor of their music reflected Motor City’s moribund economy, its dark passage from the birthplace of the auto industry to its burial ground. Atkins, Saunderson, and May appropriated “industrial detritus” to create sparse, kinetic funk with drums like thunderbolts, yet mournful and deeply romantic, as if the machines were whispering a lament about what it was like to be young and black in postindustrial America. At the same time, they were young enough to be perversely fascinated by the very technologies that had downsized the American dream for factory workers in black Detroit. “Berry Gordy built the Motown sound on the same principles as the conveyor belt system at Ford’s,” explained Atkins. “Today they use robots and computers to make the cars. I’m probably more interested in Ford’s robots than Berry Gordy’s music.” But Afro-Futurism bubbles up from the deepest, darkest well-springs in the intergalactic big-band jazz churned out by Sun Ra’s Omniverse Arkestra, in Parliament-Funkadelic’s Dr. Seuss-ian astrofunk, and in dub reggae, especially the bush doctor’s brew cooked up by Lee “Scratch” Perry, which at its eeriest sounds as if it were made out of dark matter and recorded in the crushing gravity field of a black hole (“Angel Gabriel and the Space Boots” is a typical title).

The Rastafarian cosmology, like the Nation of Islam’s, with its genetically engineered white devils and its apocalyptic vision of Elijah Muhammad returning on a celestial mothership, is a syncretic crossweave of black nationalism, African and American religious beliefs, and plot devices worthy of a late-night rocket opera. Perry—arguably the preeminent practitioner of the audio juju known as dub—incarnates the Afro-Futurist sensibility. Erik Davis asserts that “what is most important about Perry and his astounding musical legacy is how they highlight an often ignored strain of New World African culture: a techno-visionary tradition that looks as much toward science-fiction futurism as toward magical African roots.” Writes Davis, “This loosely Gnostic strain of Afro-diasporic science fiction emerges from the improvised confrontation between modern technology

and the prophetic imagination, a confrontation rooted in the alienated conditions of black life in the New World.” He quotes the African-American critic Greg Tate: “Black people,” says Tate, “live the estrangement that science-fiction writers imagine.”

Which explains the seemingly counterintuitive conjunction of black dance music and SF imagery in hip-hop. Tricia Rose argues that South Bronx hip-hoppers such as Afrika Bambaataa embraced the robotic synth-pop of Kraftwerk because what they saw reflected in the German band’s android imagery was “an understanding of themselves as already having been robots.” Says Rose, “Adopting ‘the robot’ reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society. By taking on the robotic stance, one is ‘playing with the robot.’ It’s like wearing body armor that identifies you as an alien: if it’s always on anyway, in some symbolic sense, perhaps you could master the wearing of this guise in order to use it against your interpolation.”

Afro-Futurism percolates, as well, through black-written, black-drawn comics such as Milestone Media’s *Hardware* (“A cog in the corporate machine is about to strip some gears. . .”), about a black scientist who dons forearm-mounted cannons and a “smart” battle suit to wage guerrilla war on his Orwellian, multinational employer. Milestone’s press releases for its four titles—*Hardware*, *Blood Syndicate*, *Static*, and *Icon*—make the Manhattan-based company’s political impulses explicit: a fictional metropolis, Dakota, provides a backdrop for “authentic, multicultural” superheroes “linked in their struggle to defeat the S.Y.S.T.E.M.” The city is a battlefield in “the clash of two worlds: a low-income urban caldron and the highest level of privileged society.”

Icon, an exemplar of Afro-Futurism that sweeps antebellum memories, hip-hop culture, and cyberpunk into its compass, warrants detailed exegesis. The story begins in 1839, when an escape pod jettisoned from an exploding alien starliner lands, fortuitously, in the middle of a cotton field on Earth. A slave woman named Miriam stumbles on “a perfect little black baby”—in fact, an extraterrestrial whose morphogenetic technology has altered it to resemble the first lifeform it encounters—in the smoldering wreckage of the pod and raises it as her own. The orphan, christened Augustus, is male, and echoes of the Old Testament account of Moses in the bullrushes, the fay changelings of European folklore, and the infant Superman’s fiery fall from the heavens reverberate in the narrative’s opening passages.

Like his Roman namesake, Augustus is a “man of the future”; the man who fell to Earth is seemingly deathless, outliving several generations of his adopted family and eventually posing as his own great-grandson—

Augustus Freeman IV—in present-day Dakota. A rock-ribbed conservative who preaches the gospel of Horatio Alger and inveighs against the welfare state, Freeman is a highly successful attorney, the only African-American living in the city's exclusive Prospect Hills neighborhood. His unshakable belief in bootstrapping is challenged, however, when he takes a homegirl from the projects, Rachel "Rocket" Ervin, under his wing. A juvenile delinquent and Toni Morrison (!) fan, the streetwise teenager opens Augustus's eyes to "a world of misery and failed expectations that he didn't believe still existed in this country." She calls on him to use his otherworldly powers to help the downtrodden. When he does, in the guise of a mountain of bulging abs and pecs called Icon, she joins him as his sidekick. "As the series progresses," we are told, "Rocket will become the world's first superheroine who is also a teenage, unwed mother."

The New York graffiti artist and B-boy theoretician Rammellzee constitutes yet another incarnation of Afro-Futurism. Greg Tate holds that Rammellzee's "formulations on the juncture between black and Western sign systems make the extrapolations of [Houston] Baker and [Henry Louis] Gates seem elementary by comparison." As evidence, he submits the artist's "Ikonoklast Panzerism," a heavily armored descendant of late '70s "wild style" graffiti (those bulbous letters that look as if they were twisted out of balloons). A 1979 drawing depicts a Panzerized letter "S": it is a jumble of sharp angles that suggests the *Nude Descending a Staircase* bestriding a jet ski. "The Romans stole the alphabet system from the Greeks through war," explains Rammellzee. "Then, in medieval times, monks ornamented letters to hide their meaning from the people. Now, the letter is armored against further manipulation."

In like fashion, the artist encases himself during gallery performances in Gasholeer, a 148-pound, gadgetry-encrusted exoskeleton inspired by an android he painted on a subway train in 1981. Four years in the making, Rammellzee's exuberantly low-tech costume bristles with rocket launchers, nozzles that gush gouts of flame, and an all-important sound system.

From both wrists, I can shoot seven flames, nine flames from each sneaker's heel, and colored flames from the throat. Two girl doll heads hanging from my waist and in front of my balls spit fire and vomit smoke. . . . The sound system consists of a Computator, which is a system of screws with wires. These screws can be depressed when the keyboard gun is locked into it. The sound travels through the keyboard and screws, then through the Computator, then the belt, and on up to the four mid-range speakers (with tweeters). This is all balanced by a forward wheel from a jet fighter plane. I also use an echo chamber, Vocoder, and system of strobe lights. A coolant device keeps my head and chest at normal temperature. A 100-

watt amp and batteries give me power.

The B-boy bricolage bodied forth in Rammellzee's "bulletproof arsenal" with its dangling, fetishlike doll heads and its Computator cobbled together from screws and wires, speaks to dreams of coherence in a fractured world, and to the alchemy of poverty that transmutes sneakers into high style, turntables into musical instruments, and spray-painted tableaux on subway cars into hit-and-run art.

Rammellzee's Afro-Futurist appropriation of the castoff oddments of technoculture is semiotic guerrilla warfare, just as his "slanguage"—a heavily encrypted hip-hop argot—is the linguistic equivalent of graffiti "tags" all over the mother tongue. In an essay on English as the imperial language of the Internet, the cultural critic McKenzie Wark argues for the willful, viral corruption of the *lingua franca* of global corporate monoculture as a political act. "I'm reminded of Caliban and Prospero," he writes. "Prospero, the Western man of the book, teaches Caliban, the colonial other, how to speak his language. And Caliban says, 'You give me words, that I might curse you with them.' Which is what happens to imperial languages. The imperial others learn it all too well. Make it something else. Make it proliferate, differentiate. Like Rammellzee, and his project for a Black English that nobody else could understand. Hiding in the master tongue. Waiting. Biting the master tongue." Wark's analysis resonates with Tricia Rose's notion of hip-hop countersignage as "master[ing] the wearing of this guise in order to use it against your interpolation."

African-American culture is Afro-Futurist at its heart, literalizing Gibson's cyberpunk axiom, "The street finds its own uses for things." With trickster élan, it retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the techno-commodities and science fictions generated by a dominant culture that has always been not only white but a wielder, as well, of instrumental technologies. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reminds us:

Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. . . . "Reading," in this sense, was not play; it was an essential aspect of the "literacy" training of a child. This sort of metaphorical literacy, the learning to decipher complex codes, is just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition.

Here at the end of the twentieth century, there's another name for the survival skill Gates argues is quintessentially black. What he describes as a deconstructionist ability to crack complex cultural codes goes by a better-known name, these days. They call it hacking.

“On the Other Side of the Glass”

The Television Roots of Black Science Fiction

Why, with the noted exception of Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany, have black authors only lately begun to impact upon science fiction? “Black to the Future,” Walter Mosley’s media-related answer, predicts a postmillennial black science fiction explosion and notes the pervasive presence of media images that link whiteness with power: “Media images of policeman, artists, and fireman from before the mid-sixties were almost always white. Now imagine blackness. There you will find powerlessness, ignorance. . . . Or you will simply not find anything at all—absence. . . . Only within the last thirty years have positive images of blackness begun appearing in even the slightest way in the media” (Mosley 203). Science fiction, as we all know, reflects reality. How, before the mid-1960s, could blacks see themselves as starship captains if reality denied them the opportunity to pilot airplanes? Why would blacks recast themselves as extraterrestrial aliens if they were alienated from everyday American life? Certainly blacks were disinclined to write about aliens because they had to struggle with being perceived as aliens. Why would blacks imagine, say, black Alpha Centauri denizens when alien encounters were defined as blacks showing up in white suburbia? I combine the ideas of Mosley, Neal Gabler, and Neil Postman to argue that from the ’60s to the ’90s, television served as a remedial education program which taught viewers how to see blacks as normal people. I wish to announce that black television stars are the

mothers and fathers of black science fiction. My purpose is to explain that television laid the groundwork for the twenty-first-century outpouring of black science fiction Mosley describes.

► I. Defining Black Normalcy

Or, Bill Cosby Has Not Lost His Mind

I rely upon the complex claim that television normalized black reality to pave the way for the black fantastic. There are, of course, myriad definitions of black authenticity and subjectivity. Within the milieu of television, *Amos 'n Andy* was faulted for omitting successful blacks while *The Cosby Show* was faulted for omitting impoverished blacks. Bill Cosby himself has famously chastised the black underclass for irresponsible parenting—and Michael Eric Dyson has countered him in *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* As John McWhorter argues, the “normal” black reality debate involves the “old way focused on assimilation” and the “new way [which] elevated separatism” (McWhorter A23). I link televised images of blacks to the assimilation Cosby advocates.

Cosby’s vision of black normalcy is quite congruent with the one John H. Johnson published in *Ebony Magazine*. Johnson created *Ebony* (1945) to show that “Negroes got married, had beauty contests, gave parties, ran successful businesses, and did all the other normal things of life” (McWhorter A23). My use of the term “black normalcy” coincides with the views of black normalcy that Johnson, McWhorter, and Cosby advocate. According to McWhorter, “the fact remains that since the 60’s, blacks have found that some assimilation and striving in the mainstream is usually a surer path to success than embracing angry separatism. *Ebony* and *Jet* have covered this triumph lovingly . . . given the eternal static in the air claiming that the scowling poses of the likes of *Vibe* magazine are the essence of the ‘real’ for black people” (A23). The approach found in *Ebony* and *Jet* “is a victory” because “it shows that blacks hitting the heights in the mainstream arena are no longer extraordinary” (A23). Television established that the fact of blacks accomplishing “all the other normal things of life” is the essence of the real for black people. And McWhorter calls today’s pervasive presence of blacks on television “something to celebrate” (A23). Because television now pervasively portrays black normalcy, blacks are finally free to imagine themselves confronting the science-fictional alien Other, to see themselves as protagonists within the pages of a work such as Joanna Russ’s *Extra (Ordinary) People*. The postmillennial black science fiction explosion is occurring after television took forty years to establish that black normalcy, as Johnson and Cosby define it, is very real—not at all extraordinary.

Hence, I claim that in order to account for the recent outpouring of black science fiction, it is necessary to attribute this proliferation to the televised progression that made it possible.

Black science fiction characters emanate from very real stars, the black television personalities who inhabit the space that Gabler, in *Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, calls "on the other side of the glass" (185). According to Gabler, there are two Americas consisting of the privileged people who live behind the television glass and the lesser citizens who don't, those on the wrong side of the television broadcast signal tracks/divide who cannot go through the looking glass/television screen. Spending forty years viewing the positive images of the black protagonists who live behind the glass had myriad positive results. For example: the impenetrable looking glass television screen—the mirror mirror pervading interior domestic spaces—progressed from framing *Amos 'n Andy* to emphasizing this new fact of American life: the respectively black and white *The Facts of Life* protagonists Dorothy "Tootie" Ramsey and Blair Warner both attend the same elite private girls boarding school. The pictures behind the glass morph. Viewers watching the black *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* Captain Benjamin Sisko boldly ensconced within outer space where no black starship captain had gone before could see his real counterparts: the faces of black space shuttle pilots behind the glass of real space helmet visors. Fiction is usually pictured on the other side of the television screen glass. The demise of minstrel-show blackface and the new rise of successful blacks on television led to the reality of the black face behind the space helmet glass—and the black writer on the science fiction novel cover. As Postman said in a video documentary that featured him, "the growth of more tolerance in America is because of television. There was a time when people could not see someone different from them. This can't happen today. Television is responsible" (Urbano). Television is responsible for the postmillennial black science fiction surge.

I illuminate this statement by giving black television actresses equal representation with the black male television stars we all know. I argue that after forty years during which black characters on television became ever more normal, these characters gave rise to new characters—and real people (such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice)—who jump to the other side of the glass to represent—and act as—social power brokers. Media ecologists see communications systems as environments. I argue that crosspollination has occurred between television and reality which establishes a new late-twentieth-century normalcy for blacks and makes the burgeoning of black science fiction possible.

II. Outlining Black Science Fiction's Television Heritage

Or, I Spy Dominique Deveraux Knocking Amos, Andy, and Beulah's White Socks Off

Amos 'n Andy has a female-centered counterpart born from racist caricature: *Beulah*, which focuses upon an overweight black maid. Before black science fiction could come into its own, Will Smith¹ had to supplant the shuffling, buffoonish Amos and Andy, and attractive clothes horse Hilary Banks (Smith's cousin on *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*) had to supplant Beulah. This transition began with what I call the short black boy syndrome. Gary Coleman and Emmanuel Lewis were the abnormally short boys who respectively starred in *Diff'rent Strokes* and *Webster*, the stories of poor black children adopted by rich white families. These boys, who were short to the point of resembling midgets, at once became the economic betters of the *Amos 'n Andy* protagonists and did not threaten white manhood. Short black girls never had sitcoms of their own.

George Jefferson (played by Sherman Hemsley), television comedy's first successful black male entrepreneur, was also short. Despite his business acumen, Jefferson also did not threaten white manhood. *The Jeffersons* made it patently clear that Jefferson differed in both appearance and demeanor from his economically successful WASP neighbor, Tom Willis. Jefferson's wife, Louise, a person of intelligence and integrity, looked very much like Beulah. Despite the negative stereotypes that characterized George and Louise, *The Jeffersons* was groundbreaking because it emphasized that the black community is characterized by economic stratification. The black Jeffersons had a black maid, Florence Johnston (who preceded Geoffrey, the Banks family's black butler). The physical difference between the corpulent Louise and her thin, elegant, sophisticated black neighbor Helen Willis was patently obvious to viewers. Helen is a normal upper-class person, and, as such, she is a precursor to Will Smith's aunt on *Fresh Prince*, Vivian Banks. The Jeffersons are indeed "movin' on up," as the show's theme song announces, when their son Lionel marries the Willis's beautiful and normal-in-every-way mixed-race daughter Jenny. *The Cosby Show*'s Cliff and Clair Huxtable are a more mature version of Jenny and Lionel Jefferson.

Benson improves upon *The Jeffersons* in that Benson is exceedingly well-spoken and of normal height. But Benson is always subordinate to the governor throughout the various manifestations of his employer/employee relationship with him. Benson, the governor's culturally sophisticated,

foreign-accented right-hand man, has more in common with the Banks family's British, socially sophisticated butler, Geoffrey, than with the rather boorish, typically American Philip Banks. Americans do not emulate uppity foreign cultural codes. Benson is no Will Smith. It was, of course, Bill Cosby starring in *I Spy* who first played a black man acting as a white man's social and action adventure hero equivalent. *I Spy* made it possible for Will Smith to star in the film version of *I, Robot*. Bill Cosby is the father of black science fiction.

Before blacks could imagine themselves confronting intergalactic heights, it was necessary to establish that it is normal for them to integrate, say, Brooklyn Heights. The Huxtables, who made Brooklyn Heights their home, normalized the image of a black professional family. No television teenage girl was ever cooler than Denise Huxtable. Even now, more than twenty years after *The Cosby Show* first aired, the Huxtable family does not appear to be dated. In fact, Clair Huxtable, who manages perfectly to balance being a high-powered lawyer with raising five children, is a fantasy vision in relation to women's still very real difficulty resolving their domestic and professional responsibilities. Cosby, in addition to being the father of black science fiction, emphasized black fatherhood. Cliff Huxtable's relationship with his married daughters, Sondra and Denise, is more complex than that of Sholom Aleichem's Tevye with his five daughters. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye's daughters get married and leave his house; Sondra and Denise get married and bring husbands *and* children into the Huxtable home. So much for stereotypes about dysfunctional black nuclear families. Cliff's ever-increasingly complex domestic situation does not position him as a precariously balanced black fiddler on a Brooklyn Heights roof.² Instead, in terms of their comfort with black culture, the Huxtables are groovin' to opening shot theme song jazz while literally standing on the Apollo Theater's roof.

Little Rudy Huxtable could grow up to be "Jewish-American Princess" incarnate Hilary Banks. Before *The Cosby Show* ended, in the manner of Philip Banks, Cliff Huxtable welcomed a poor cousin into his affluent home. Unlike *Webster* and *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Cosby* and *Fresh Prince* portray blacks making economic strides via deriving assistance from their own families, not from white strangers. *Fresh Prince* more overtly emphasizes the black economic success *The Cosby Show* portrayed. In economic terms, Dr. Huxtable is to Philip Banks as Dr. Kildare is to Mr. Drysdale (Jed Clampett's rich banker neighbor on *The Beverly Hillbillies*). Unlike Jed, who in his pre-oil strike days is a white version of caricatured *Amos 'n Andy* protagonists, Philip Banks truly belongs in Bel Air. Unlike Beulah, Hilary Banks is a black pretty woman.

And Professor Vivian Banks is a pretty—and intelligent, professionally

competent—black woman.³ Vivian is a “sistah” of Clair Huxtable. Professor Banks owes her existence to a protagonist who came before her: Diahann Carroll playing nurse and single mother Julia Baker on *Julia*. Diahann Carroll, not Phylicia Rashad, is the mother of black science fiction. Clair, despite her professional expertise which is mostly enacted offstage, is an appendage to Cliff, but Julia stands alone. Diahann Carroll’s role in *Julia* is the equivalent of Cosby’s in *I Spy*. Carroll is the first black woman on television to play an intelligent professional who functions as an independent agent. Julia’s son, Corey, is as cute as Rudy Huxtable. Most importantly, Diahann Carroll, who later appeared on *Dynasty*, is as compellingly beautiful as Joan Collins and Linda Evans.

The most important moment for black female science fiction on twentieth-century television does not involve the infamous *Star Trek* interracial kiss scene involving Lieutenant Uhura and Captain Kirk (“Plato’s Stepchildren” 1968). The most important moment for black female science fiction on twentieth-century television involves the words Carroll uttered on *Dynasty* when she played Dominique Deveraux. Wearing a stunningly elegant white outfit replete with a white hat (the director obviously wanted to emphasize that Deveraux is a good guy), Dominique stands alone in Blake Carrington’s office, faces the camera, and directly addresses the audience. “When they [the Carrington family] find out that I am a Carrington they will drop their socks off,” she says. Dominique, Blake’s half-sister, is in fact biologically a Carrington. Race does not prevent her from being a part of the superrich and exceedingly attractive Carrington dynasty.

The images of Dominique and her suave husband (played by Billy Dee Williams) negates “step and fetch it” black stereotypes. Dominique fits right in as a native of the Carrington’s home planet (which is, after all, a different world from the one most Americans inhabit). Dominique is as important to black science fiction as Lieutenant Uhura: she shows that black women’s reality in terms of beauty and economic power is equal to that of white women. Dominique can hold her own with Alexis vis-à-vis power and beauty. Even blonde bombshell Krystle does not outshine her. Black science fiction springs from the once almost-nonexistent black-empowered reality that *I Spy* and *Dynasty* portrayed. These shows function as behind-the-glass crystal balls, windows on the future, twenty-first-century worlds in which empowered black reality is exceedingly normal. Ashley Banks, normal American teenager incarnate, absolutely fits into contemporary Bel Air. Her father, Will Smith’s Uncle Phil, is no Uncle Tom. True, Philip Banks is noticeably fat as surely as George Jefferson is noticeably short. His corpulence, however, is normal in that it makes him look like America. Ensnared within her elite neighborhood economic comfort zone, no *Twilight Zone* fiction, Ashley can grow up to become a

science fiction writer. No alien herself, she can comfortably invent alien encounter fictions.

Today, the real Will Smith lives in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in Los Angeles. He and his wife, Jada Pinkett-Smith, exemplify the glamour and wealth that Dominique Deveraux and her husband exude. The Smiths can be themselves, not the Carringtons. The Smiths are not aliens; they just play alien encounterers in the movies. The progression I chart, which moves from the negative stereotypes of blacks depicted in *Amos 'n Andy* and *Beulah* to the reality of black affluence shown on *Cosby* and *Fresh Prince*, has influenced black reality and, in turn, black science fiction. After forty years of television development, normal black protagonists have jumped to the other side of the television glass into reality and science fiction. Jada Pinkett-Smith, Halle Berry, and Vivica A. Fox have appeared in science fiction movies. But there is no female counterpart to Will Smith as blockbuster science fiction movie hero. Smith—star of *Independence Day*; *I, Robot*; and *Men In Black*—is the hottest science fiction movie star of our day. *Fresh Prince* functioned as Smith's on-the-other-side-of-the-glass portal: he jumped through to become the fresh black face of the male science fiction movie hero.

His jump is rooted in television. The upper-middle-class black protagonists on *The Jeffersons* begat the rich professional protagonists on *Cosby* who begat the hyperrich characters on *Fresh Prince*. Propelled forward by his role on *Fresh Prince* and the black-action-hero role *Cosby* pioneered on *I Spy*, Smith became the premiere action adventure science fiction film actor of the new millennium. This is not the case for black female actors and protagonists. Black women did not jump from behind the television glass into roles as stellar movie science fiction adventure heroes. Instead, individual black women attained real-world power which science fiction did not foresee. There is no science fiction example of a black woman becoming a secretary of state or a media tycoon. Yet, in the manner of Will Smith, Condoleezza Rice and Oprah Winfrey owe their success—success which even defies science fiction parameters—at least partly to television's images of black normalcy.⁴

Nurse Julia begat the business-savvy Dominique Deveraux who begat lawyer Clair Huxtable. Clair Huxtable begat Professor Vivian Banks and her daughter, talk show host Hilary Banks. Professor Vivian Banks is a contemporary of Professor Condoleezza Rice; Hilary Banks is a young Oprah Winfrey. We are comfortable with real black woman holding positions of power which even science fiction did not portray; we watched these roles evolving on television for forty years. Black normalcy is busting out all over from a forty-year-old television incubation period. Due to television, Butler and Delany no longer stand as the lone exemplars of blacks who

write science fiction. The positive and normal images of blacks that jumped from behind the glass into prominent, real-world roles places them on the brink of creating science fiction's newest new wave: the burgeoning of black science fiction that Walter Mosley describes (and that is exemplified by the black science fiction writers I include here in *Afro-Future Females*).

► III. Transcending Stereotypical Racial Categorization

Diahann Carroll, the mother of black science fiction, engendered black female progeny who inhabit science fiction worlds. Whoopi Goldberg famously played Guinan, the all-knowing *Star Trek* black female alien. The omnipotent black female called The Oracle in *The Matrix* certainly springs from Guinan. Another seemingly garden-variety woman who makes everything happen appears in John Singleton's film *Four Brothers*—and she is white. I connect Singleton's Evelyn Mercer to Guinan and The Oracle to argue that she signals a new understanding of black science fiction—and of racial categorization itself.

Mercer adopts four sons; three are black and one is white. The four biologically unrelated men become a band of brothers when they eschew racial categories and band together to avenge their adoptive mother's death. A movie plot involving four exceedingly tough men who are obsessed with their mother's memory is as incongruous as one with all-powerful science fiction aliens (such as Guinan and The Oracle) being depicted as black women. *Four Brothers*, using a white woman as a catalyst, calls for an end to categorization in regard to race. Despite the male protagonists' differing parentage, they do function as brothers; racial difference plays no part in their relationship. Singleton presents this eradication of racial difference in terms of science fiction. In the confrontational denouement which takes place on the frozen Lake Michigan, when one of the most notorious hoodlums in Detroit is forced to dig his own grave on the ice, one observer says, "this is science fiction and he [the hoodlum] is an Eskimo." No matter how incongruous the prospect of a black Eskimo may be, the hoodlum digging a hole on the ice *is* acting like an Eskimo. And this ice scene *is* comparable to science fiction in that it functions as an analogue to how readers respond to Genly Ai and Estraven's encounter on the ice in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. When Genly Ai and Estraven interact on the ice, readers do believe that they have transcended gender. When the interracial brothers interact on the ice, viewers do believe that they have transcended biology, that they are in fact brothers. Evelyn Mercer *is* their mother. Her race and her biological disconnection to her sons are of no importance.

Diahann Carroll is the mother of black science fiction which, regardless of Mercer's race, situates Guinan, The Oracle, and Mercer functioning similarly as omnipotent female protagonists. *Four Brothers* shows that Guinan, The Oracle, and Mercer—like the mythological Fates—are sisters.

This sisterhood constitutes a new way to interpret the relationship between characters. Such newness should also apply to actors as well. Diahann Carroll and Bill Cosby, as I have stressed, are the television star messengers in regard to the development and understanding of the new burgeoning medium which is black science fiction. Black science fiction stands ready to surge forth from the positive black image incubation period which took place behind the television glass and dive into the wreck of racism. We all want to be members of the Huxtable family. We all want to live like and look like Dominique Deveraux and her husband. Guinan, The Oracle, and Evelyn Mercer are the real and fictitious mothers of us all.

► IV. Katrina Storms the Racial Reality Studio⁵

I have described how television depictions of blacks generated images that led to the acceptance of black normalcy and, in turn, now function as a foundation for the proliferation of black science fiction. Now, during the early twenty-first century, television broadcasts pictures of unprecedented American natural catastrophes, and all viewers can see that while many American blacks do in fact live analogously to the Huxtable family, the newly accepted normal images of professional blacks do not apply to the majority of blacks. Hurricane Katrina's destruction underscores this point. Katrina inverted Gabler's "on the other side of the glass" divide between the blacks who are on the same economic level as the Huxtables and the underprivileged black masses. The multitudes of New Orleans blacks who were impoverished to the extent that they lacked bus fare to escape from their city were newly positioned behind the glass; the whole world watched the roots of American racism. Floodwaters placed an entire urban poor black population behind the television glass and washed away the social constructions that had rendered this population invisible.

This point was lost on no one—except President Bush. The pervasive television coverage of Katrina made the obvious absolutely clear: "The whites got out. Most of them, anyway. If television and newspaper images can be deemed a statistical sample, it was mostly black people who were left behind. Poor black people, growing more hungry, sick, and frightened by the hour. . . . What a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans . . . wasn't just a broken levee. It was a cleavage of race and class, at once familiar and startling new, laid bare in a setting where they suddenly amounted to mat-

ters of life and death” (DeParle 1). The shocked world saw something new located on the other side of the glass: a reality show of unprecedented historical proportions that revealed the life-threatening manifestations of the Grand Canyon-esque cleavage between race and class in America. The relationship between this horrific newness and black science fiction was not articulated. Images of black men carrying looted televisions are indelible; the looted televisions, in reality patently useless because there was no electricity available in New Orleans, symbolize the complete lack of analysis devoted to interpreting the catastrophe in terms of science fiction.

Nor did commentators equate Bush’s September 15, 2005 speech—delivered in New Orleans’ Jackson Square in front of the St. Louis Cathedral—with science fiction. Lighting made Bush’s shirt and the cathedral appear to be the same grayish-blue color. Bush seemed to merge with the cathedral to become a brave new creature: a cyborgian juxtaposition of human and building to communicate that the president has literally become one with the city. The word “future” resonated throughout Bush’s speech. He imagines a new New Orleans, the future of a predominantly black city, as surely as Delany imagines Bellona, the ruined city in *Dhalgren*. Bush, in the manner of a science fiction writer, describes a future urban vision, a vision that will impact predominantly upon black residents. His speech, which evokes Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, also alludes to the black science fiction writers who build new black worlds. Casting Bush as analogous to a black science fiction writer is no less absurd than his handlers’ efforts to position him as Roosevelt’s and Johnson’s elocutionary force clone.

Maureen Dowd understands Bush’s Jackson Square speech in terms of Walt Disney: Bush “looked as if he’d been dropped off by his folks in front of an eerie, blue-hued castle at Disney World. . . . His gladiatorial walk across the darkened greensward, past a St. Louis Cathedral bathed in moon glow from White House klieg lights, just seemed to intensify the sense of an isolated, out of touch president clinging to hollow symbols. . . . The president is still looking for a gauzy beam of unreality in New Orleans” (A15). Frank Rich concurs with Dowd’s linkage between the televised image the speech conveyed and Disney. He describes “Karl Rove’s Imagineers” directing Bush’s “laughably stagy stride across the lawn to his lectern in Jackson Square. (Message: I am a leader, not that vacationing slacker who first surveyed the hurricane damage from my presidential jet)” (12). When Rove’s Imagineers bathed the flooded New Orleans in “moon glow” klieg lights, they inadvertently evoked imagery straight out of a grade B science fiction movie. Bush seems to have been staged by Chief Engineer Scotty in the *Star Trek* transporter room rather than by Rove’s Imagineers: he seems to have beamed down on a “gauzy beam of unreality” emanating from his

presidential jet recast as spaceship. The gray-blue-shirt-clad President Bush striding across the grass in front of the gray-blue-lit St. Louis Cathedral edifice flanked by the statue of Andrew Jackson astride his horse presents a picture that evokes the clichéd little green male alien who lands on the White House lawn and demands, "Take me to your leader." Message: George W. Bush, the leader, is no Andrew Jackson—and no Captain James T. Kirk. Science fiction has taught every culturally literate American that the president is supposed to be the leader to whom the White House lawn ensconced alien is taken, not the alien slacker who beams down to the St. Louis Cathedral lawn belatedly to claim responsibility for governmental ineptitude that resulted in an unprecedented ruined American city disaster—a disaster which renders apocalyptic science fiction real.

The *New York Times* reported that Katrina disaster "scenes that could have been lifted from *The Grapes of Wrath* or maybe the Book of *Exodus*, continued to be played out" (Barry 9). True enough. But the horrific scenes could have been more pertinently lifted from Delany's *Dhalgren* and Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*. New Orleans is now most certainly analogous to Delany's Bellona, the destroyed city that exposes the veneer of civilization, the perpetual disaster zone emanating from failed race relations. Further, all the young black women evacuees newly speaking from behind the television screen represent many versions of Butler's Lauren Olamina, a refugee who flees from a ruined urban environment laid waste by global warming and racial strife. George W. Bush might meet his Waterloo because the whole world watched him fail to show any symptom of the disease which afflicts Lauren: "hyperempathy syndrome," the ability to directly feel the suffering of others.⁶ Instead of trying to save face by surrounding himself with the conservative black leaders who do not wish to be associated with him, Bush would have done well to consult with Butler and Delany. Butler and Delany created the science fiction scenarios that predict the fate of New Orleans. It has become a cliché to say that, in relation to such newness as cloning and ever-increasing technological advances, we live in a science fiction world. We need to recognize that post-9/11 Americans now inhabit a black science fiction postapocalyptic, post-Katrina world.⁷

Katrina names this non-brave new world born from cowardice in the face of the need to spend federal government money to improve levees, as well as the need to deconstruct the social barriers that separate impoverished blacks from economically secure whites. Katrina names the failure adequately to spotlight this schism in the strobe lights illuminating the stage sets ensconced behind the glass (television viewers never saw Amos, Andy, and Beulah literally drown in a sea of poverty). Countering the sexism which until recently called for hurricanes to be designated solely by female names, Katrina rewrites the cliché about frailty in relation to

women. Frailty thy name is now the racist American social class stratification system, Katrina announces. Frailty thy name is George W. Bush in particular and the American federal government's ability to protect its citizens in general, Katrina goes on to say. The worldwide attention given to the televised eye of the storm will make it more difficult to continue to turn a blind eye to the conditions that caused impoverished and vulnerable American citizens to become forever unidentifiable and nameless corpses. It is unlawful to picture the coffins containing dead Americans who fought in Iraq; the federal government's attempts to block televising pictures of the New Orleanians who became corpses failed. Rebuilding New Orleans and our divisive social systems involves building black science fiction and building upon the no-longer science-fictional scenarios that Butler and Delany imagined. New Orleans just might emerge as the prototype equalitarian American city of the future, a brave new American world we can now only imagine. Due to the television roots of black science fiction I have described, people are now comfortable seeing fictitious lawyer Clair Huxtable appear as the very real, absolutely not science-fictional Michelle Obama.

Notes

1. The character Will Smith plays on *Fresh Prince* is named Will Smith.
2. My reading of the Huxtable family in terms of Jewish culture is not idiosyncratic. Jazz, for example, as Harvey Fierstein pointed out when he narrated "From Shtetl to Swing," emanates from both black and Jewish culture. Echoing the obliteration of rigid racial and ethnic stereotypes I advocate, the PBS Great Performances Web site states, "'From Shtetl to Swing' tells the story of the cross-pollination of Jewish and African-American musical influences, two traditions born out of exile and longing, yet charged with an energy and freedom that gave voice to a new multicultural America" (<http://wwwpbs.org/wnet/gperf/shows/shtetl/>). So too for black sitcoms. *The Fresh Prince*, for instance, was created by Andy and Susan Borowitz. The Borowitzes were probably quite conscious of Hilary Banks's resemblance to a Jewish-American princess which I note. I heard Andy Borowitz say that Hilary Banks is based upon Quincy Jones's princess-like daughter.
3. Vivian Banks was said to be a professor only during the first three seasons of *Fresh Prince* when she was played by Janet Hubert-Whitten. No mention was made about Vivian being a professor when she was played by Daphne Maxwell Read during seasons 4 through 6.
4. For a discussion of how to understand Condoleezza Rice in terms of science fiction, see Marleen S. Barr, "A Last Situation: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Cultural Critic Leslie Fiedler," *Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).

5. I refer to Larry McCaffrey's title *Storming the Reality Studio*.

6. Unlike Bush, Bill Clinton, as we are all aware, has marvelous hyperempathy skills. The *New York Times* describes how Clinton applied these skills to Katrina victims: "He kissed babies, hugged their parents, felt their pain and smiled for cell phone photos. Bill Clinton was back in his element . . . on a tour of Louisiana, and at times even seemed to forget his status as a former president" (Strom A24).

7. It is not farfetched to use a hurricane as a setting for a science fiction story. The premise for a television show called *Invasion* is that a hurricane serves as a smokescreen to mask a conspiracy about an extraterrestrial alien takeover. The premiere of *Invasion* (September 21, 2005) coincided with the devastating impact of Katrina.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The Editor

Marleen S. Barr, who is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction theory, teaches in the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University. She has won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr is the author of *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*; *Lost In Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*; *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*; *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*; and *Oy Pioneer!: A Novel*. She has edited many anthologies and coedited the special science fiction issue of *PMLA*.

The Contributors

Steven Barnes has taught writing at UCLA and the Clarion Writers' Workshop, written for television, hosted radio shows, and created life-writing workshops. He is the author of fifteen novels (including the 2003 Endeavour Award winner, *Lion's Blood*, which imagines a pre-Civil War United States where whites are slaves and blacks are the masters). He says, "After publishing about two million words of science fiction [including the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Legacy of Heorot* and *The Cestus Deception*] and having about twenty hours of produced television shows [including *The Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits*, *Andromeda*, and *Stargate*, as well as four episodes of the immortal *Baywatch*], I've got opinions on the writing life. After earning black belts

in judo and karate, and practicing the Indonesian art of Pentjak Silat Serak for the last ten, well, I have some opinions there, as well.”

Octavia E. Butler—whose love, talent, and generosity are beyond words—wrote these words to Marleen S. Barr about her participation in this volume: “I hope your readers enjoy ‘The Book of Martha’” (January 11, 2004).

Samuel R. Delany is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Temple University. Walter Mosley says this about him: “Mr. Delany is it. He is the center. He is one of our most amazing writers and thinkers. You’re sitting in a room with one of the greatest men in American literature. Period.”

Mark Dery, who teaches in the Journalism Department of New York University, is a prominent commentator on new media, unpopular culture, and the digital age. He edited *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, a seminal anthology of cybercrit. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, and an essay on guerrilla media, “Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of the Signs.” Dery has written a column on fringe literature, “Invisible Lit,” for *Bookforum* and has done cultural commentaries for *Radio Nation*. His most recent book is the essay collection *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink*.

Madhu Dubey is Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where she teaches courses in African-American literature and culture. Her research interests include African-American literature, cultural studies, and postmodern theory. She has published two books: *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* and *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. *Signs and Cities* is the first book to consider what it means to speak of a postmodern movement in African-American literature. She is also the author of various articles on twentieth-century African-American literature, nationalism, and postmodernism. Dubey asserts that for African-American studies, postmodernity best names a period, beginning in the early 1970s, marked by acute disenchantment with the promises of urban modernity and of print literacy.

Tananarive Due has written seven books ranging from supernatural thrillers to science fiction to a civil rights memoir. *The Living Blood* received a 2002 American Book Award. *Publishers Weekly* named both *The Living Blood* and *My Soul to Keep* as being among the best novels of the year. *The Good*

House was nominated as Best Novel by the International Horror Guild. *The Black Rose*, based on the life of entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. *My Soul to Keep* will be a major motion picture at Fox Searchlight Pictures. Due's newest novel, *Joplin's Ghost*, juxtaposes the supernatural, history, and the present-day music scene. *Freedom in the Family: A Mother-Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights*—which Due coauthored with her mother, civil rights activist Patricia Stephens Due—was named Best Civil Rights Memoir by *Black Issues Book Review*.

Carl Freedman, Professor of English at Louisiana State University, is the author of many articles and of *George Orwell: A Study in Ideology and Literary Form*. Freedman is the recipient of the Science Fiction Research Association's 1999 Pioneer Award. His *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* was selected by *Choice* as an Outstanding Academic Book of the Year. In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, Freedman traces the fundamental and largely unexamined relationships between the discourses of science fiction and critical theory, arguing that science fiction is (or ought to be) a privileged genre for critical theory. He asserts that it is no accident that the upsurge of academic interest in science fiction since the 1970s coincides with the heyday of literary theory, and that likewise science fiction is one of the most theoretically informed areas of the literary profession.

Andrea Hairston is Professor of Theatre at Smith College where she directs and teaches playwriting and black theatre literature. She is the Artistic Director of Chrysalis Theatre and has produced original theatre with music, dance, and masks for over twenty-five years. Her plays have been produced at the Yale Rep, Rites and Reason, the Kennedy Center, and Stage West, and on Public Radio and Public Television. Hairston has received many playwriting and -directing awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Grant to Playwrights, a Rockefeller/NEA Grant for New Works, an NEA grant to work as dramaturge/director with playwright Pearl Cleage, a Ford Foundation Grant to collaborate with Senegalese Master Drummer Massamba Diop, and a Shubert Fellowship for Playwriting. Since 1997, her plays produced by Chrysalis Theatre—*Soul Repairs*, *Lonely Stardust*, and *Hummingbird Flying Backward*—have been science fiction plays. She garnered a 2003 Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship for her *Archangels of Funk*, a science fiction theatre jam. She is the author of *Mindscape*, a speculative novel.

Jennifer E. Henton is Assistant Professor of English at Hofstra University where she teaches African, Caribbean, and African-American literature as

well as women's studies and film. She is currently working on a manuscript that considers black literature's connection to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Nalo Hopkinson is the author of three novels and a short story collection: *Brown Girl in the Ring*, *Midnight Robber*, *The Salt Roads*, and *Skin Folk*. She has edited the fiction anthologies *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*; *Mojo: Conjure Stories*; *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction* (with Uppinder Mehan); and *Tesseract Nine* (with Geoff Ryman). Hopkinson's work has received honorable mention in regard to Cuba's Casa de las Américas Literary Prize. She is a recipient of the Warner Aspect First Novel Prize, the Ontario Arts Council Foundation Award for emerging writers, the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer, the World Fantasy Award, and the Gaylactic Spectrum Award. *The New Moon's Arms* is her latest novel.

De Witt Douglas Kilgore is Associate Professor of English and American Studies at Indiana University. He is the author of *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*, an incisive engagement with the science writing and science fiction produced by the modern spaceflight movement. As a history, the book takes seriously the (sometimes progressive) hopes of those scientists and engineers who wrote the Space Age into being as a great cultural project. He says, "My general field is twentieth-century American literature and culture. I am particularly concerned with exploring the political (utopian) hopes expressed by our society through its projects in science and technology. Race, as both a social and an analytic category, stands for what is most often at stake in the histories I engage and the readings. My general research agenda is to recoup the liberatory potential of sciences and narratives ordinarily prescribed as closed to nonwhite, nonmale, non-middle-class people."

Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu has had her first novel, *Zarah the Windseeker*, described by Nalo Hopkinson in this way: "[Okorafor-Mbachu's novel is a] fantastical travelogue into the unknown of a young girl's fears, and the magical world that surrounds her town. Written in the spirit of Clive Barker's *Abarat*, with a contemporary African sensibility, Okorafor-Mbachu's imagination is delightful!" *The Shadow Speaker* is her second novel. Okorafor-Mbachu says, "I named my daughter, Anya, after Anyanwu, a character from Octavia E. Butler's book, *Wild Seed*. Anyanwu means 'Eye of the Sun' in the Igbo language, which is the ethnic group that my daughter's father and I come from, though we were both born in the United States. Octavia's character is the first African, Nigerian, Igbo fantastical being that I ever came across in fiction."

Ellen Peel is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction*, which focuses upon developing original theories of feminism and narrative persuasion. The book examines how people come to believe what they do—in particular, how they are influenced by reading feminist novels, especially those that represent pragmatic feminism. Peel is currently completing *The Text of the Body / The Body of the Text*, a study that examines texts about the physical and mental construction of human bodies. In this work, she pays particular attention to self-referential literature in which construction of the human body parallels construction of the textual one.

Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan is Assistant Professor of English at Gordon College. Her articles and book reviews focus on science fiction studies, with an emphasis upon feminist science fiction. Rogan is currently working on a book called *The Future in Feminism: Reading Strategies for Feminist Theory and Science Fiction*. She describes her book in this way: “I examine feminist science fiction that either implicitly or explicitly engages feminist theory’s presuppositions and positions. My object is to use these texts to illuminate the pitfalls and potentialities presented by various works of feminist theory. Each of the works of feminist science fiction that I analyze presents a portrait of how some feminist theoretical tenet might be enacted, and the problems that such an enactment might encounter.” Rogan coedited a special issue of *Socialism and Democracy* called “Socialism and Social Critique in Science Fiction.”

Ruth Salvaggio is Professor of English at the University of North Carolina. She works in the areas of feminist and critical theory, eighteenth-century studies, and poetics. Her authored books include *The Sounds of Feminist Theory*; *Enlightened Absence: Neoclassical Configurations of the Feminine*; *Dryden’s Dualities*; and a monograph on Octavia E. Butler. She coedited, with the Folger Collective on Early Women Writers, the anthology *Women Critics, 1660–1820*. She served as Director of Graduate Studies in the interdisciplinary American Studies Department at the University of New Mexico, and as Director of the Women’s Studies Program at Purdue University. She has also served as President of the Women’s Caucus of the Modern Language Association. Her current book project concerns questions of ecology and poetics.

Nisi Shawl is the coauthor of *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Her short stories have been published in *Asimov’s SF*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Infinite Matrix*. Her reviews and essays appear regularly in the *Seattle Times*,

and she has contributed to *The Encyclopedia of Themes in Science Fiction and Fantasy* and to *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*. She has edited *Beyond* magazine, an online magazine of Afrocentric speculative fiction by teens. Shawl is a founding member of the Carl Brandon Society and is currently a board member for the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. She has been a guest lecturer at Stanford University and at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame.

Hortense J. Spillers is the Frederick J. Whiton Professor of English at Cornell University. She has, over the past twenty years, enormously enriched African diasporic literary and cultural criticism. Spillers' present work is at the intersection of psychoanalysis and black feminist criticism. She says, "In some ways, I don't believe in the collective unconscious, or racial unconscious, because if that's true then that means that we will all never be anything but haunted, each generation. If that's true, then there is an original sin, it has not been ransomed or somebody has paid the price for that, and if that's so, then we're talking about human and social fatalism and historical fatalism that I don't think I can afford to believe; that I don't want to believe. . . . But if that's so, then human agency is not going to make any difference. In some ways, politically speaking and aesthetically speaking, I can't believe it because that would then make a lot of what else I believe untrue or questionable."

Jarla Tangh, a writer at the inception of her career, is described this way by Nisi Shawl: "Jarla Tangh is well worth watching out for. Though 'The Skinned,' her tale of a guilty African immigrant facing down undead canine vigilantes, is her only published work to date, it's a strong debut that leaves its readers wanting more." De Witt Douglas Kilgore says this about "The Skinned": "Tangh's narrative combines the familiar with the new. Africa is familiarly depicted as a place of danger, a catastrophic land in which easy faith in human goodness or sanity is challenged. But Tangh's Africa is not Joseph Conrad's unknown and unknowable Africa. . . . In accordance with fantasy and horror traditions, the evil that Tangh depicts also seems to be familiar. . . . Tangh uses the convention of horrific racial invasion and violation to designate Europe as the source of primal danger."

Sheree R. Thomas is a writer, editor, small press publisher, educator, and visual artist. She is the copublisher of the literary journal *Anansi: Fiction of the African Diaspora* and founder of Wanganegresse Press. Her fiction and poetry are anthologized in *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature and Art*; *2001: A Science Fiction Poetry Anthology*; *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*; and *Mojo: Conjure Stories*. In 2003,

she was awarded the Ledig House/LEF Foundation Prize for Fiction for her novel *Bonecarver*. As a journalist and occasional book critic, her reviews have appeared in *AALBC.com*, *Upscale*, *Washington Post Book World*, *Black Issues Book Review*, *QBR*, *American Visions*, and *Emerge* magazine.

Kevin Willmott is Associate Professor in the University of Kansas Theatre and Film Department. He is the author of *Colored Men*, a study of the 1917 Houston riot. For television, he cowrote *House of Getty* and *The 70s*, both miniseries for NBC. Willmott wrote and codirected *Ninth Street*, an independent feature film starring Martin Sheen, Isaac Hayes, and Queen Bey; he plays the role of “Huddie,” one of the film’s main characters. *Ninth Street* is a comedy/drama based on Willmott’s experiences growing up in the small town of Junction City, Kansas. Set in 1968, the film deals with the last days of one of the most notorious streets in the nation. He also adapted *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* for CBS, Columbia Tri-Star, and executive producer Whoopi Goldberg. His most recent film, *CSA: The Confederate States of America*, is about an America in which the South won the Civil War.