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Reclaiming the Future: A Speculative Cultural Study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of

Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Jeanelle Domenique Horcasitas

Committee in charge:

Professor Rosaura Sánchez, Co-Chair

Professor Shelley Streeby, Co-Chair

Professor Page duBois

Professor Ari Heinrich

Professor Curtis Marez

2020

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University of California San Diego

2020

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Second, I would like to thank all the mentors and teachers in my life who made me feel like I belonged in higher education and pushed me to keep going. Thank you, Marissa, for all your thoughtful advice and mentorship while working with me on my first research project, an undergraduate honor's thesis at UCLA. Without you, I never would have thought someone like me could get my doctorate. Thank you to my incredible committee, Rosaura Sánchez, Shelley Streeby, Ari Heinrich, Page duBois and Curtis Marez. Thank you all for seeing the value in my research and work, and providing me with the expertise and guidance to help me write an



interdisciplinary dissertation on the topics and stories I truly care about. I want to give a special thanks to my co-chair, Shelley Streeby, for the enthusiasm and encouragement she's always given me. Shelley, I am so grateful for your compassion in reading my work and embracing any new ideas I brought to you. Thank you for making me feel included in the emerging speculative fiction studies collective and connecting me to people doing the work we are excited about. I also want to give a heart-felt thank you to my co-chair, Rosaura Sánchez, for believing in me even before I decided to come to UC San Diego. Rosaura, I will never forget how you wrote a letter for me (before I even got to campus) that granted me the fellowship that was invaluable to my success when I first started the program. Thank you, Rosaura, for seeing my potential as a scholar from the beginning and always giving so much of your time, love and expertise to myself and all your students even after you've retired. You're truly *la jefa*.

I also want to thank the amazing people and places that helped me create a community for myself the past five and a half years. Thank you to the Graduate Division, Career Center, Cross-Cultural Center, Raza Resource Centro, Graduate Student Association, Library, Digital Humanities Research Group, Institute of Arts and Humanities, Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination, Literature and Ethnic Studies Departments, Humanists@Work at UCHRI, San Diego Miramar College and more for welcoming me and giving me long-lasting friendships with so many incredible individuals.

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The conclusion of this dissertation, in part, is a reprint of the material as it appears in the essay “Crossing Pedagogical Front|eras through Collaborative World Making and Digital Storytelling” in the forthcoming volume *Beyond Digital Fronteras: Rehumanizing Latinx Education*. Horcasitas, Jeanelle D.; Quintanilla, Olivia, in consideration by Oxford University Press, 2020. Jeanelle D. Horcasitas was co-author of this essay.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### EDUCATION

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Dissertation title: “Reclaiming the Future: A Speculative Cultural Study”
- M.A. Literature, University of California, San Diego, March 2017
- B.A. English with a minor in Spanish, University of California, Los Angeles, Magna Cum Laude and College Honors, June 2013  
Awarded Highest Honors for Thesis “The Mexican Immigrant Experience in History, Nanotexts, and Nodes”

### TEACHING AND MENTORSHIP

Adjunct, Miramar Community College  
2018

*Responsibilities: Taught 25-50+ students per semester who are participating in the First Year Experience (FYE) Bridge program, re-entering veteran's programs, and working adults. Developed and enhanced training curriculum to prepare students for transfer-level college writing through reading and writing composition assignments with an emphasis in active learning and critical analysis. Taught English 101 from a Science Fiction/Speculative Fiction perspective using texts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to present.*

- English 101: Reading and Composition for First-Year Experience (FYE) Cohort (Spring 2020)
- English 31: Co-requisite for English 101 for FYE students (Spring 2020)
- English 101: Reading and Composition for First-Year Experience (FYE) Cohort (Fall 2018)
- English 265C: Co-requisite for English 101 for FYE students (Fall 2018)
- English 101: Reading and Composition (Spring 2018)

Teaching Assistant, UCSD Literature Department  
2018

2017-

*Responsibilities: Facilitated discussion for 100+ students on topics of Multi-Ethnic Literature (Asian American, Chicana/o, Latina/o and African American). Offered mentorship on critical thinking skills and development with writing academic essays. Developed training/curriculum using interactive digital tools to facilitate more engagement and discussion from sections.*

- LTEN 27 Introduction to African American Literature (Spring 2018)
- LTEN 28 Introduction to Asian American Literature (Fall 2017)
- LTEN 29 Introduction to Chicana/o Literature (Winter 2018)

Contemporary Issues Lecturer, UC San Diego Summer Bridge Program  
2017

*Responsibilities: Lectured for 300+ incoming undergraduate freshman from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Supervised a group of 7 undergraduate facilitators to lead discussion and develop curriculum for sections.*

Graduate Advocate, UCSD Summer Training Academy for Research Success  
2015

*Responsibilities: Mentored five community college students in the San Diego and Los Angeles area. Assisted students with transfer applications, funding, professional and academic presence, scholarship and admission essays, research tools, presenting at conferences, and applying to graduate school. Taught various research methodologies such as archival, oral interviewing, and compiling data sets. Held weekly meetings both in groups and individually. Edited personal essay and provided extra assistance for the end of the programs' Summer Research Conference.*

ESL/Long Time Learners Tutor, Alexander Hamilton High School  
2013

Mentor, Kids Reading to Succeed  
2012-2013

Managing Editor, UCLA La Gente Newsmagazine  
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#### PUBLICATIONS

“Crossing Pedagogical Front|eras through Collaborative World Making and Digital Storytelling” in forthcoming volume in consideration by Oxford University Press, *Beyond Digital Fronteras: Rehumanizing Latinx Education* (co-author), 2020

“A Call to Research Action: Transnational Solidarity for Digital Humanists” in forthcoming volume by the University of Minnesota Press, *Debates in Digital Humanities* (co-author), 2020

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reclaiming the Future: A Speculative Cultural Study

by

Jeanelle Domenique Horcasitas

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Rosaura Sánchez, Co-Chair  
Professor Shelley Streeby, Co-Chair

*Reclaiming the Future: A Speculative Cultural Study* examines authors of color who use speculative fiction as a tool of resistance and empowerment to (re)imagine the past, present and future for people of color in the US. This dissertation is organized into three parts: 1) Speculative

Fictions from the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 2) Speculative Fictions From the 1970s to Now, and 3) Critical Dystopias in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Beyond. The first part explores two novels from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902-03) and Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote* (1928). These chapters explore issues of racist science and experimentation in medicine and science on black people; and the utopian and dystopian symbol of the American Dream for Mexican immigrant laborers during the 1900s-1930s. The second part investigates texts from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) and Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017). These chapters discuss issues of reproductive oppression and sterilization abuse of poor women of color in the 1970s, and the speculative horror of real and imagined criminalization and mass incarceration of black people today. The final part analyzes two texts from 2009, Alex Rivera's film *Sleep Dealer* and Rosaura Sánchez's and Beatrice Pita's *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*. These chapters interrogate issues of the future, such as: surrogate humanity and the invisibility of virtual laborers outsourced around the world; and the remapping of nation-states that use settler colonialism to displace people of color onto neo-Reservations and the moon. Despite these dystopian realities, my analysis emphasizes what science fiction scholar Tom Moylan calls the "enclaves of resistance" that exist in these texts to develop a critical dystopia so that people of color can reclaim these narratives and write themselves into the future. I argue that authors of color use speculative fiction as a practice to explore the lived and living experiences of their present dystopian realities and historically oppressive and violent pasts. My speculative cultural study highlights the social activism of people of color in the rewriting and world making of more equitable futures.

## Introduction

### Writing and World Making by People of Color in Conditions of Dystopia, Utopia, and Critical Dystopia

“Art and culture themselves are time-traveling, planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out. And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.” – Walidah Imarisha from *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*

Many believe that it is no longer a matter of *if* we are on the path to destruction and the end of our days, but rather, a matter of *when*. But for people of color and marginalized communities, we are living our dystopian nightmares now and have been for decades. With a volatile political leadership in place and horrific natural disasters that leave some of the most vulnerable places and people in the world in ruins – there is very little hope for the future.<sup>1</sup> Despite our great technological achievements, we are still enacting a lot of irreversible damage on the world. Whether that be through continued wars abroad, predatory capitalistic practices both in the US and globally through labor, outsourced marketing, or xenophobia and racialization – we are far from the perfect US American “utopian” society that we are often promised. Despite these harsh realities there are still people who are finding hope and who are advocating for new possibilities for the future, particularly through speculative fiction and world making.<sup>2</sup> Speculative fiction literature and cultural studies analysis are at the heart of my research project *Reclaiming the Future: A Speculative Cultural Study*, to generate what I call a speculative cultural study. I argue that authors of color, specifically black and Latinx writers and

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico and left a devastating impact on the people living there. Recently in 2019, Hurricane Irma destroyed a lot of the infrastructure and livelihoods for people living in the Virgin and Caribbean Islands.

<sup>2</sup> My reference to American as a utopian society comes from Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993). I discuss this further in my definitions of utopia, dystopia and critical dystopia.

film makers, may use speculative fiction to provide a critique and nuance that is transformative and even suggestive of what we can expect in the future while making connections to our past and present realities. I also argue that a critical dystopia is a necessary tool for people of color in these stories and in reality, to engage in organizing collectively and dismantling oppressive, racist and powerful institutions that make way for creative and authentic world making.<sup>3</sup> I analyze how speculative fiction can be more powerful than some of the narrow definitions and narratives of science fiction. In contrast to science fiction, speculative fiction may make a frequently marginalized voice more visible and prominent, particularly the one belonging to people of color and immigrants of color.

Speculative fiction provides an alternative way of thinking about how our past and present realities have been shaped, and more important, how they influence our futures. In *Reclaiming the Future*, I analyze texts that I classify as speculative fiction. I focus on works written by people of color and use speculative fiction as an umbrella term that encompasses elements of science fiction, fantasy, horror, satire, and other genres for each of the texts that I explore.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I use the terms utopia, dystopia and critical dystopia as keywords for understanding the complexities and entanglements that these futuristic worlds often represent in speculative fiction. Thus, to understand how I implement these various concepts in my chapters I will first provide a few definitions that inform my overall approach to these works.

First, I would like to make a distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction. Although my project will focus on speculative fiction, many texts that I use are also considered

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<sup>3</sup> This is a brief definition of the elements that make up a critical dystopia and I will provide a more in-depth overview later in this introduction.

<sup>4</sup> The 1978 entry on speculative fiction in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines it as, “stories that go beyond sci-fi and deal with ‘ethical and moral demands’ made in new worlds to come” (“Speculative Fiction,” Compounds). This definition is important in showing some of the intersections of speculative fiction and science fiction when it comes to imagining new worlds. I argue that speculative fiction written by people of color is more rooted in socio-political issues and world making that produces a critical dystopia that spurs collective action and organizing.



science fiction. When referring to science fiction in my analysis, I understand it according to Rob Latham's definition in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* as a genre that cross-pollinates with technocultural realities and popular discourses of science and technology in various forms of cultural production. I argue that simply considering science fiction texts is limiting, because narrow definitions of science fiction may exclude some of the speculative elements and technologies created by people of color and immigrants of color, or how technology and science may be reclaimed and transformed to fulfill a new need for marginalized communities. I use and understand the terms of science fiction and speculative fiction as sometimes intersecting and sometimes at odds with each other. Using speculative fiction allows me to explore issues such as race, class, sexuality, and gender from perspectives that are sometimes more fixed from a science fiction context in what the future may look like. Speculative fiction is an important tool and practice for people of color and marginalized communities because it allows for reimagining and writing in a way that extrapolates from past and present issues of oppression and exploitation, and for navigating and surviving in the possible dystopian future. I build on this definition of speculative fiction by referring to people of color who use it in their writing, such as Daniel Venegas, Pauline E. Hopkins, Octavia E. Butler, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jordan Peele, Alex Rivera, and Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita, who use it to suggest transformative changes in their respective communities – which oftentimes have shared goals as is seen in anthologies of speculative fiction produced by people of color. I will discuss this emergence of speculative fiction anthologies produced by people of color in my next section to add to my understanding and definition of speculative fiction and how it functions among historically underrepresented groups. I believe it is necessary to have a term other than science fiction to show how people of

color produce a space that allows them to have a voice in how the future is envisioned and shaped with them in mind.

Anthologies such as Sheree R. Thomas's *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* urged the world to recognize the works of African Americans who have been writing science fiction and speculative fiction for many decades.<sup>5</sup> Thomas explains her use of speculative fiction through a metaphor of "dark matter." She wanted to convey that, "People have always been frightened by what they cannot see – and the specter of blackness looms large in the white imagination" (Thomas xiii). The idea of an invisible yet undeniable force (dark matter) resonates with people of color who attempt to write themselves into a future despite the past and present realities and violent histories that seek to erase and repress their voices. Thomas also explains, "Like dark matter, the contributions of black writers to the sf genre have not been directly or fully explored" (xiii). For that reason, recent anthologies such as *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* emphasize the importance of contributions by authors of color and assert that speculative fiction is more of a practice of activism and world making, rather than an abstract concept for people of color. Walidah Imarisha explains how simply envisioning a world different than our own (one without war, prisons, violence, etc.) is an act of speculative fiction. This is a critical observation of speculative fiction for my analysis because my goal is to illustrate how it is used as both theory and *practice* by people of color who not only write it, but also participate in world making and actively create critical dystopias in our current social moment. Another aspect of speculative

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas explains that her goal in compiling this collection of stories was to offer "the diverse range of speculative fiction from the Africa diaspora and to encourage more talented writers to explore the genre. By uniting the works of the early pioneers in the field with that of established and emerging new writers, perhaps the necessary groundwork for the discussion and examination of the 'unobserved' literary tradition has been laid" and includes contributions from people in US, Canada, the Caribbean, and Britain.

fiction's definition is the idea of historicizing the present, a concept that I build on from Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism*, in which he explores science fiction literature.<sup>6</sup> I refer to historicizing the present to expand upon and apply it to speculative fiction as a practice of preserving and creating new cultural memories, especially as a future-history archive in conjunction with a critical dystopia, which I will discuss in the next section.<sup>7</sup>

My definition of critical dystopia is derived from Tom Moylan's *Scraps of Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, a text where he explains that capitalism's reproduction of utopia has left tropes of dystopia that "represent and inform what critique and opposition remain" and this is demonstrated in how transnational corporations often replace nightmare states in the speculative fiction works I analyze (187). I suggest that it is a critical dystopia that addresses the impacts from utopia and dystopia. A critical dystopia is a tool to interrogate and offer alternatives to change the present system so that marginalized people can survive, but also create a social reality that is not determined by "enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few" (Moylan 189). I argue that a true critical dystopia seeks to eliminate institutionalized barriers of racism, exploitation, oppression, etc., for people of color and immigrants of color to spur collective action and organizing that gives them the support and solidarity needed to reclaim power and imagine and shape new worlds together. Some of the texts that I analyze do contain traits of a critical utopia, but some are still at odds with the idea

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<sup>6</sup> Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, argues "Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (284). Although speculative fiction can be important for historicizing the present, Samuel R. Delany also explains in John Akomfrah's 1996 film *The Last Angel of History* that it can be useful for pointing to "significant distortions of the present."

<sup>7</sup> I will briefly discuss what a future-history archive is in my section on the framing for my chapter on *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* but will provide a more in-depth interpretation and analysis in its dedicated chapter.

that living in a dystopian world is sometimes inescapable – both in a real and speculative world.<sup>8</sup> In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan state, “critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: The ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work” because critical dystopias often exists as “hybrid” texts (7).<sup>9</sup> They classify works such as Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*, as a hybrid texts that uses tropes of science fiction and speculative fiction in a time travel, survivalist sf, and slave narrative. I argue that other works by Butler, such as *Wild Seed*, are not only hybrid or “genre-bending” texts, but also show how Butler practices speculative fiction by using archival materials, research and journal writing to criticize the past and present and theorize alternative visions of the future. Although I will expand upon *Wild Seed* later, I wanted to underscore Baccolini’s and Moylan’s perception of dystopian narratives by people of color (such as Butler’s) as an “*impure* genre, with permeable borders, which allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to a hegemonic ideology that reduced everything to a global monoculture” and reinforces my argument that speculative fiction narratives are more representative of the imaginative and creative stories people of color can tell, than what they may be limited to doing with science fiction (8). Baccolini and Moylan also state that their research is primarily focused on “Anglo-American sf literature and film” and this reaffirms the need to explore speculative fiction by people of color to be considered for their

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<sup>8</sup> In *Scraps of Untainted Sky*, Moylan refers to his definition of critical utopias from *Demand the Impossible* (1986), which states, “A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream.” I argue this dream-like and fantasy critical utopia is present in *Of One Blood* and *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, and this is why these texts cannot reach a full critical dystopia. Moylan adds that critical utopias were an “investigation of the utopian process by way of content that critiqued utopia’s own tendency to closure and compromise raised the stakes of the utopian imagination in all its manifestations” (83).

<sup>9</sup> My definition of utopian impulse comes from Jameson’s interpretations of Ernst Bloch’s work and the desire for a future in the form of the new, a desire that drives history forward. Jameson builds on the idea of the utopian impulse that seeks to reevaluate the conditions, limits, and possibilities of utopia, typically marked by works of science fiction and speculative fiction.

contributions and critical perspectives on utopia, dystopia and critical dystopia (8). More important though, I argue speculative fiction by people of color illustrates the transformative impact a critical dystopia has to resist closure and totalizing utopias and dystopias in past, present and future worlds to collectively work together and generate new forms of knowledge, cultural memories and preservation, and world making that rejects dominant power structures. *Reclaiming the Future* seeks to fill the gap in Baccolini's and Moylan's analysis by providing a revisionist history and alternative definitions of what utopia, dystopia and critical dystopia mean to people of color from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to our present day.

Since *Dark Matter*'s release, several anthologies by and about people of color have been published in the past decade that emphasize the need to acknowledge and encourage the writing, studying, and practice of people of color who use speculative fiction to rewrite and reclaim their histories and futures. For example, in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Grace L. Dillon explains the importance of not only writing stories of speculative fiction and science fiction, but also why they aid survival for marginalized and oppressed groups. Dillon states, "The trick is to avoid becoming 'a mere archive, covering the earth with empty traces of a lost plentitude,' a public memory that exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs" (6). In other words, speculative fiction allows people of color to write about their present so as not to be lost within public memory or erased from history. On the other hand, there is also this idea of using speculative fiction to encourage hope and resilience, or even a utopian promise that can be fulfilled. In *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín explore speculative fiction specifically because of "its boundlessness and its unabashed insistence on the utopian as a real possibility" (1). In contrast, the science fiction canon can be limiting when only exploring hypothetical possibilities

of scientific or technological advances and “the existence of alien life, space or time travel, etc.,” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition suggests (“Science Fiction,” Def. 3). I do want to acknowledge that not all science fiction is focused on these themes, but I believe speculative fiction by people of color helps us think about the past, present, and future beyond fixed boundaries and focus on other issues such as race, class, gender, and more. Even though my texts imagine varying dystopian realities, there is still a desire for some sort of utopian ending of happiness and hope. At the same time, these texts critique these dystopian worlds by creating a critical dystopia, where enclaves of resistance also emerge. In Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, he explains that there are imaginary enclaves that emerge in real social spaces, and I argue that these move toward formulating the enclaves of resistance Moylan discusses, and in turn, emerge from a dystopian reality and begin shaping the critical dystopia to enact true change in the world. A critical dystopia is key to framing the parameters of my analysis, but I want to clarify its differences with utopia and dystopia as well.

My definition of utopia is derived from Philip E. Wegner’s essay “Utopianism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*. In Wegner’s essay, he defines utopia and utopianism through Darko Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement and the “novum” (or break from the present). Wegner explains that the types of worlds envisioned in narrative utopias are “material” because the world is a product of human labor. Often, a utopia is perceived as a perfect world and society. In *Reclaiming the Future*, I build on this complex definition of utopia by exploring how it is not only a beacon of hope for people of color, but also (despite its hope for progress) an idea sometimes supported by more right-wing projects for government and transnational corporation as well. In Sacvan Bercovitch *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic*

*Constructions of America*, he illustrates the utopian symbolism behind the US as a divine nation and the responses it generates:

All utopian visions express powerful feelings of social discontent...and while some of them are thus incorporated into the ideology of a new social order, nonetheless, *as* utopian visions, even these remain a potential source of social unrest, a standing invitation to resistance and revolt...It portrays the American ideology, as all ideology yearns to be portrayed, in the transcendent colors of utopia...identify[ing] the American future as utopia, and utopia, by extension, as the American Way. (364, 367)

In this excerpt, Bercovitch explains what guides utopian visions to develop new worlds in the first place, and how this may be met with resistance and I argue, possibly produce enclaves of resistance and critical dystopias. Bercovitch's statement also suggests that the ideology of US America as utopia is entrenched in the belief that the US American future is utopian. As a result, this rhetoric encourages the progress of the US by supporting policies and initiatives that will help the US move forward as a powerful nation no matter who may be impacted negatively by these changes. This "American Way" of thinking may provoke a revolt, and one that I argue has the potential to ignite a critical dystopia for marginalized communities (especially people of color and immigrants of color) to resist and fight against being subject to the displacement, oppression, exploitation, and even erasure that sometimes accompanies this ideology of the US American future as utopian.<sup>10</sup>

Another key word for my analysis is dystopia, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as, "an imagined place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible" a space which is also perceived as the opposite of the word utopia as listed in this reference book; or, the "terrible place" found in critical dystopia ("Dystopia," Def. 1). But I argue dystopia is not only an

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<sup>10</sup> A notable example of this idea of upholding a utopian "American Way" of life is captured by President Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." A few projects his administration has attempted to change are: immigration policies (also DACA), tax-cuts for the wealthy and disbanding the Affordable Care Act (Obama Care).

imagined place or condition, or something limited to a certain time and place. Rather, I consider dystopia to be a state of living, especially for people of color and immigrants of color as represented in speculative fiction and reality. I recognize and define dystopia as both lived and living experiences, sometimes with a hope for a better world, and sometimes simply with the acknowledgement of the impossibility of it in a world of institutionalized racism and oppression. In *Dark Horizons*, Baccolini and Moylan provide the genealogy of dystopia in what they call “Dystopia and Histories.” Baccolini and Moylan situate their argument in relation to critical utopia, and how it recognizes the limitations of some of the utopian elements in literature and traditions that do lose hope when confronted with the dystopian elements that often emerge when trying to achieve a utopia. During the 1980s, Baccolini and Moylan explain that utopian and critical utopian imaginings were replaced with full-fledged dystopias, specifically in “popular imagination of Anglo-American societies” (3). I do not agree, however, that these utopian imaginings completely disappeared. Instead, I argue, they have been reshaped by critical dystopias and world making by people of color imagining alternative futures in speculative fiction. This emergence of critical dystopias by people of color is significant considering Baccolini’s and Moylan’s claim that utopias were replaced by dystopias specifically for an “Anglo-American” society. By the end of the 1980s, Baccolini and Moylan found that some authors were now using dystopia differently, in a more “critical” way to provide solutions for changing their social realities, a kind of activism most used by people of color. *Reclaiming the Future* illuminates this historical shift by first exploring early 20<sup>th</sup> century speculative fiction novels where critical dystopias are not fully achieved; and then examining how they gain momentum in the 1980s through theory and practice; and are most prominent in the works I analyze from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash join utopia and dystopia together in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* to add to these ever-changing definitions and situate them in relation to the historical and material conditions brought upon by utopia and dystopia in society, especially when it comes to “progressing” the US American utopian nation by using people of color and immigrants of color for cheap labor or as experimentations for scientific and medical discoveries. These scholars assert, “Utopias and dystopias are histories of the present,” a remark that signifies how these concepts shape history as we know it and not just envision the future (Gordin et al. 1). Gordin et al. do not simply create a binary between dystopia and utopia as opposites; their introduction asks readers to perceive utopia and dystopia as “styles of imagination, as approaches to radical change,” which are important to how my work seeks to rearticulate utopian and dystopian imaginings and definitions that are not as fixed as we have come to believe, particularly, in works by people of color who use speculative fiction as a *practice* to restructure these concepts and *do* enact radical change in their communities in a broader context through critical dystopia and world making (5).

In *Reclaiming the Future*, I locate certain moments in history, particularly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, to investigate how utopian and dystopian imaginings are often entangled within one another, particularly for people of color and immigrants of color. I discuss how using critical dystopia may or may not lead to tangible results, but at the very least, begins a conversation or provides possible solutions to address the issues at hand. I hope to determine, or at least ask the question: what kind of world do we live in now? How can we define it? Are these terms of utopia and dystopia too fixed? I believe that these terms are too fixed since the world we live in is much more complex, fluid and multifaceted. My question then is: why do some of these speculative fiction narratives seem to emphasize a return to the same oppressive practices and

cycles shown throughout history? I argue that looking to speculative fiction and science fiction texts from the past can help inform our present and even help us to speculate on the outcomes of our futures. Making connections from actual historical, sociological, political and American Studies sources provides a context for the literary texts that I analyze and fulfills the cultural study framework of my research hopes to achieve as an interdisciplinary project. I use an array of interdisciplinary secondary sources to convey how certain texts may provide a counter-narrative or critique of labor (virtual, physical, and affective), immigration, scientific experimentation and exploitation, and larger systemic issues related to criminalization, mass incarceration, sterilization abuse and settler colonialism, to exemplify predominant cultural and societal impacts across time and space. My goal is to recognize people of color who use speculative fiction as a *practice* for understanding, theorizing and world making as sources of hope and resistance; but also, to historicize their present and develop a cultural memory of their past and present, especially through a future-history archive, and becoming more empowered in shaping better futures for themselves.

I have organized my project into three parts. The first part is entitled “Speculative Fictions from the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” In this first part, I explore two novels written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that I reclassify as works of speculative fiction, Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood, Or, the Hidden Self* (1902-3) and Daniel Venegas’s *The Adventures of Don Chipote, or, When Parrots Breastfeed* (1928). In the first chapter, “Resisting and Reproducing Racist Science with Speculative Technology in Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood*,” I argue that Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* is a foundational work of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism that challenges Western scientific and medical methodologies by valuing African knowledge production, specifically the occult and mysticism, to develop what I call a hybridized speculative technology by the

protagonist, Reuel Briggs.<sup>11</sup> I illustrate how Hopkins's novel addresses a post-slavery society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that perpetuates racist ideologies that extend beyond Jim Crow laws, by exploiting and experimenting on black people to promote progress and innovation in medicine and science. I assert that Hopkins's novel advocates for a return to the motherland, Africa, as the only alternative for black people to thrive and survive in the future. The ending of this novel suggests a utopian answer that does not necessarily enact change or a solution in the protagonist's present social realities as a critical dystopia would. I offer a complex reading of *Of One Blood* because, despite the success of Reuel's speculative technology (a hybrid of Western and African scientific and medical practices), there is ultimately a rejection of Western society in favor of a purely African one. But more important, this speculative technology reproduces scientific experimentations on the black body, specifically a black woman named Dianthe, and solidifies gender hierarchies that situate black women as one of the most vulnerable of subjects to experimentation in Western society. I build on Hopkins's foundational work in the second part of my project that includes an analysis of Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* and focuses on the reproductive injustices and sterilization abuse of black women and women of color during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century (1970s), as well as the scientific exploitation of black bodies to extend and preserve white life in director Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*. For the purpose of this chapter on Hopkins, I engage with works that add to the theoretical, historical, and cultural studies framework of my analysis and my concept of speculative technology, especially Brit Rusert's

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<sup>11</sup> My definition of "Afrofuturism" refers to De Witt Douglas Kilgore's essay on "Afrofuturism" from *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*. He suggests that Afrofuturism is a responsibility of storytelling, so that black people can tell their own stories, rather than having them told by others. Additionally, it operates as a cultural force that helps science fiction to gain more social and historical depth – helping to make visible the creative black production of futures, especially futures that have been dominated by Eurocentric extrapolations. Also, this novel has been primarily recognized as work of modernist fiction. By "modern" I am referring to Modernist literature which Andrzej Gasiorek defines in *A History of Modernist Literature* (2015) as, "an early twentieth-century phenomenon, which was committed to renewing the arts through various kinds of experimentation, and which was under way by the 1890s or early 1900s and was more or less at an end by the late 1930s" (1)

*Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*, Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, and Susan Gillman's *Blood Talk American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*.<sup>12</sup> I begin with Hopkins's *Of One Blood* as an example of an early work of speculative fiction that is influenced by violent and oppressive histories of racist science and medical experimentations on black people and black bodies that sometimes participates in those same practices, and is more critically addressed in later works by black authors and filmmakers such as Butler and Peele.

In the second chapter of part one, titled, "The American Dream as Utopia, Dystopia, and Virtual Reality in Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote*," I explore 20<sup>th</sup> century US-Mexico border and labor policies, and emergent industrial technologies represented in Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote*. This chapter focuses on Mexican immigrants that contributed to the US economy and industrial progress through their cheap labor, giving them a kind of "temporary citizenship." I argue that this novel is also an early work of speculative fiction because aspects of science fiction and fantasy are found in the utopian and dystopian representations of Mexico and the mythical "American Dream."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, I suggest that emerging technologies of industrialism, such as the railroad and the cinema, are early versions of virtual reality because of their ability to transport people into different worlds, which is especially destabilizing for the Mexican immigrant and protagonist, Don Chipote, who is thrust into various alternate realities when negotiating between his Mexican and new US American

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<sup>12</sup> I recognize that there are many bodies of scholarship that exist on this topic, but I have chosen these works for their specificity on the history of experimentation on black people and black bodies in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as their engagement with features of speculative fiction (such as Gillman's exploration of the occult and "racial hypnotism," and Rusert's term "speculative fugitive science") that add to my definition of speculative technology.

<sup>13</sup> This novel is traditionally recognized as a satirical and semi-autobiographical work by the author Daniel Venegas

identities. I believe that Don Chipote embodies what I call a transactional identity, not only because of the material conditions that wear his body down while working as a cheap laborer for money, but also for his participation in US consumerism and capitalism and the values of the “American Dream” that he believes he has achieved. I refer to scholars specializing in Mexican immigration for this chapter, such as Francisco Balderrama, Camille Gonzalez-Guérin, David G. Gutiérrez, George Sánchez, and Douglas Monroy, to provide the historical and sociological context for this novel and highlight the relationships between the US and Mexico after the Mexican Revolution, the mass migrations of Mexican immigrants into the US as a source of cheap labor, and the scapegoating of these same Mexican immigrants during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Like *Of One Blood*, *The Adventures of Don Chipote* is also a foundational work of speculative fiction for the texts I explore later on, especially the film *Sleep Dealer*, directed by Alex Rivera, that take up these issues of labor, immigration, and virtual reality in the context of a post-9/11 xenophobic neoliberal and biocapitalist society. *The Adventures of Don Chipote* also resonates with Rosaura Sánchez’s and Beatrice Pita’s *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* and its reimagined future where settler colonial practices of the past are replicated, such as displacing people onto Reservations, and *moon tecos* are erased completely by being killed after their labor is used up to remove toxic waste on the moon. Despite Don Chipote’s successes and failures in this novel, he gets deported back to Mexico and uses his experiences to warn his compatriots about immigrating to the US because of all the hardships that await, and this suggests the rejection of the US as a possible utopian space for Mexican immigrants (and people of color) and represents it as a dystopian place made to exploit and oppress them. Even though Don Chipote provides more of a critique than Reuel in *Of One Blood* (who tries to bridge Western/African ideologies together), he only slightly gestures to a critical

dystopia since he cannot make any grand transformational changes to the US power structures, such as those we see in Sánchez's, Pita's and Rivera's narratives. This first part of *Reclaiming the Future* sets the scene for early 20<sup>th</sup> century speculative fiction and its long history of being written by people of color whose lived experience ultimately shape their visions of their futures as unsettling and unfulfilling utopias in the US or abroad. Many of these issues I have presented get taken up later on by authors and creators of color in my subsequent chapters to convey what a strong critical dystopia looks like and how it can be used to practice world making and give power back to people of color and immigrants of color, so that they can reclaim their place in the future.

In the second part of *Reclaiming the Future*, titled "Speculative Fictions from the 1970s to Now," I build on my arguments from the Hopkins chapter about scientific and medical experimentation on black people and black bodies to focus on the reproductive oppression and sterilization abuse of black women and poor women of color in the 1970s in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), as well as our contemporary moment of everyday criminalization, mass incarceration and exploitation of black people and people of color with Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017). I investigate some of the false progress narratives under the guise of "multiculturalism," an emergent term in the 1970s, especially around the 1976 Bicentennial in *Wild Seed*, and Peele's critique of the homogenizing concept, *All Lives Matter*, that undermines the value of black life in the *Black Lives Matter* movement.

In the chapter titled, "Alternative Histories and Futures of Reproductive Justice in Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed*," I argue that Butler uses speculative fiction as a practice for theorizing about the future based on her archives, research, and journal writing in her novel *Wild Seed*. She extrapolates from the social realities she observed in the 1970s regarding reproductive

oppression, sterilization abuse, eugenics, and the sexual violence against black women and poor women of color. I analyze the characters Anyanwu and Doro, two immortal beings, and specifically Doro's representation of utopian eugenic policies and misleading multiculturalism rhetoric that was emerging from the 1976 Bicentennial. On the other hand, I analyze how Anyanwu's shape shifting powers that challenge eugenic family planning initiatives through interracial and queer families allow her to embody the elements of reproductive justice and the possibility for alternative reproductive technologies.<sup>14</sup> I argue Butler's novel engages with the women of color feminists and activists who were advocating for abortion rights and more important, reproductive justice. This chapter refers to the Octavia E. Butler Papers at the Huntington Library, where I have located Butler's research notecards and journal writing from her commonplace books, to exemplify her reflections, critiques and discussions of the social conditions she was living through in the 1970s. Butler's archival material demonstrates how she uses speculative fiction as a practice to extrapolate from her world, and theorize on the possibilities of the future if given the opportunity to create a world in which black women (and women of color in general) have complete autonomy over their bodies and on the challenges they may face even with this power.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, she uses speculative fiction as a practice for envisioning a critical dystopia through new family formations and world making that defy dominant power structures. In this chapter, I refer to scholars who discuss reproductive oppression, sexual violence, eugenics and the possibilities for reproductive justice during the 1970s, such as Dorothy Roberts, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger,

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<sup>14</sup> I will define "reproductive justice" at length in my chapter on *Wild Seed* but it is derived from Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger's *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (2017).

<sup>15</sup> For example, the success of *Roe vs. Wade* (1973) provided access to abortions, yet women of color still suffered as a result. Often, women of color on welfare programs were forced to become sterilized if they wanted an abortion. As a result, this "autonomy" over one's body is not entirely true, particularly for poor women, especially women of color, who were negatively affected even further with the implementation of the Hyde Amendment (1976), which ended federal funding for abortions.

Anne Valk, and Alexandra Minna Stern. My analysis draws from archival material, historical, sociological, and feminist sources to reaffirm the intersections that speculative fiction illuminates in *Wild Seed*. Although this novel raises thought-provoking questions and offers promising solutions, it does not reach a critical dystopia that enacts changes to the US's racist and sexual oppression because the protagonist, Anyanwu, voluntarily returns to the powerful and problematic figure of Doro in the end (as opposed to Reuel who removes himself entirely from the US, or Don Chipote who is forcibly removed from it). Nonetheless, Butler's *Wild Seed* conveys the hidden power people of color have in formulating their own futures and the possibilities of a better tomorrow when imagining alternative futures.

In this next chapter, titled "Real and Imagined Speculative Horrors in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*," I argue that the film *Get Out* uses both horror and speculative fiction, which I refer to as speculative horror, to illustrate the everyday horrors found in the lived and living experiences of black people, specifically with the mass incarceration, criminalization, exploitation and sometimes the complete erasure (killing by police) of black people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I classify this film as speculative horror because it illustrates real and imagined fears that black people face every day in the face of institutional racism and white supremacy that wrongly criminalize them. The dominant speculative horror represented in this film is the utopian white imagination of the Armitage family, that preys on and uses black bodies and black lives to extend white life. The Armitage family achieves this utopian vision by replacing the depths of a black person's consciousness, enslaving him or her in a dystopian "sunken place" where they must watch their lives being lived out by another, and completely surrendering his or her psychological and physical control to the person who has taken over his or her body. My analysis draws connections to the sunken place and the current state of mass incarceration in the US today. This



chapter also challenges the universalizing *All Lives Matter* slogan to insist that the *Black Lives Matter* movement needs to be recognized as its own movement because of the dehumanization and oppression black people face that make their lives more vulnerable. My analysis sometimes refers to topics from Hopkins's and Butler's texts because of the presence of the occult (hypnosis) to gain control over black consciousness and the body (like Reuel); and also, the hijacking of black bodies to use as hosts to immortalize the white individual (like Doro) by surgically removing the black person's brain and transplanting the white individual's brain in its place in what is called the Coagula procedure. My analysis focuses on the criminalization and mass incarceration of black people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, living in a dystopian reality where they can be thrown into a version of the sunken place, that erases them from society and promotes the white supremacist US American utopian imagination that Bercovitch theorized, and how this film allows viewers to understand what is truly at stake for black people and their lives in the future.<sup>16</sup> While this film does reimagine historical moments, specifically the antebellum period and slavery, the scholarship I use is on the criminalization and mass incarceration of black people, black subjectivity, film theory, and the current activism of groups such as *Black Lives Matter*.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the other three texts mentioned, this film does have a seemingly happy ending and situates a black lead and even a secondary black character as the heroes of defeating the Armitage family and destroying their business in exploiting and literally consuming black people.<sup>18</sup> Even though a critical dystopia does appear to be reached in this film, it is too centered

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the Netflix special *When They See Us* (2019), directed by Ava DuVernay brought to light the stories of the five young men involved in the "Central Park Five" jogger murder and sexual assault case in 1989. The hope is that more stories like this will emerge and tell the stories from the perspective of black people who have fallen prey to mass incarceration and criminalization.

<sup>17</sup> I refer to American Studies, film studies, historical, theoretical, and sociological works from scholars such as bell hooks, Murray Leeder, Michelle Alexander, Adilifu Nama, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Ashley Atkins and Alexander G. Weheliye

<sup>18</sup> I want to note that even though this ending is seemingly happy, Peele originally had a different more "realistic" ending but opted for this alternate one and I will discuss that choice further in this chapter.

on the individual (which happens in the film *Sleep Dealer*, too). As I have noted earlier, a true critical dystopia is reached when communities organize and fight together to dismantle powerful institutions (not just one part) and explicitly change the trajectory of the future. I do believe, however, that this film contributes to a larger cinematic and cultural community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century comprised of a generation of black leaders in film, art, music, literature, and more who share similar stories, but also more complicated histories and aspects of black identity as well.<sup>19</sup>

I brought Butler and Peele's texts together as examples of how the living and lived experiences of black people have changed since Hopkins's novel was published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Racist science, reproductive justice, sexual violence, criminalization and mass incarceration are all factors contributing to the erasure of communities made up of black people and people of color in future narratives. I argue Butler and Peele *practice* speculative fiction to historicize their present realities through archiving, research, journal writing, and visual storytelling and performance. By using speculative fiction, they have estranged us from our current realities by bringing us into these seemingly fictional worlds, but at the same time, have created narratives of truth based on our present conditions that urge us to think critically about our past and present, and not only speculate about the future, but also to take the necessary steps to change our worlds right now. As I shift into the final part of *Reclaiming the Future*, I want to emphasize my intention in building up these narratives to convey how they culminate into the full-fledged visions and critical dystopias from a Latinx perspective, and how these next couple of narratives capture how the past and present affect the lives of people of color and immigrants of color in science fictional futures. I argue that these final two texts move us toward a critical

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<sup>19</sup> For this I am referring to films such as Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and the "emotional" picture and album of Janelle Monae's *Dirty Computer* (2018) that explores being a black queer woman. Also, Spike Lee's *Black KKKlansman* (2018) (and more recently *See You Yesterday* (2019), a time traveling film on *Netflix*), and Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018).

dystopia because of their focus on community organizing, social justice, and activism, and enclaves of resistance that seek to overthrow the future oppressive systems in place and generate a future-history archive as well.

In the final part of my project, titled, “Critical Dystopias in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Beyond” I revisit some of my earlier arguments and explorations from the 20<sup>th</sup> century text *The Adventures of Don Chipote* to investigate virtual labor, surrogate humanity, biocapitalism, immigration, settler colonialism, and xenophobia post 9/11 in a neoliberal era following the 2008 market crash with two works published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Alex Rivera’s film *Sleep Dealer* (2009) and Rosaura Sánchez’s and Beatrice Pita’s *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* (2009). In these future worlds, I suggest that transactional identity becomes more neoliberal as a result of transnational corporations that outsource labor and products globally, and as a result, dictate one’s worth based on the amount of points, stars, and viewers one has, in a hyper capitalist version of virtual reality and real life that is different than what was happening in Don Chipote’s emerging technological and industrial era.

In my chapter titled, “Virtual Labor, Surrogate Humanity, and the Techno-Utopian American Dream in Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*,” I explore Rivera’s “near-future” in the film *Sleep Dealer* and the role of virtual labor, affective labor, and surrogate humanity in a global economy that outsources labor from Mexicans working in sleep dealer factories along the border. In this future, the border is highly militarized, and the US withholds and profits from the water it contains in a dam in Oaxaca, Mexico. Rivera’s imagined future uses virtual reality to get invisible cheap labor from Mexicans and eliminates the possibility of physical immigration in a new vision of techno-utopia. Now, Mexican immigrants in search of work, such as the protagonist, Memo Cruz, must “get connected” by implanting technological nodes into their

bodies to directly connect them to this new biocapitalist global economy and technology. Being a sleep dealer like Memo, however, is not the only reason to get connected. Other characters, like Luz, are writers that use nodes to tell stories mediated by artificial intelligence technology that manipulates one's own (and others) memories to sell on the platform TruNode. Virtual labor can also be used to weaponize people, as is the case with the character, Rudy, who uses his nodes to control military drones that kill "aqua-terrorists" that threaten the privatized water in the dam. I explain the affective qualities of virtual labor through Kalindi Vora's work *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* to interrogate the depletion of not just physical energy from this new labor force, but the life-giving energy that comes from the neurological connection that can affect one's memory and even cause blindness. I also draw from Neda Atanasoski's and Kalindi Vora's theoretical work from their article "Surrogate Humanity: Posthuman Networks and the (Racialized) Obsolescence of Labor" to exemplify how *Sleep Dealer* embodies the concepts of surrogate humanity and techno-utopia. Moreover, I refer to Jodi A. Byrd's article "'Do they not have rational souls?': consolidation and sovereignty in digital new worlds" to explore the desensitization and detachment to violence, and representation of empire in video games that resonate with Rudy's work as a military drone pilot and how he performs for the entertainment of viewers watching the show DRONES. I also analyze the ethical and moral boundaries that are often crossed with workers like Luz, who use their affective labor to sell other people's memories, and Rudy, who kills innocent Mexicans accused of being aqua-terrorists to protect US interests and entertain others on reality television. I emphasize the dehumanization of Mexican immigrants and people of color who augment their bodies to "cross" the border, or in this case, connect to the global network, that causes them to become surrogate humans in the larger techno-utopian vision. This chapter also investigates the

immigration policies of the future in a more militarized US nation-state, and how Mexican immigrants will be affected by augmenting their bodies neurologically and biologically with nodes to cross the border. In *Sleep Dealer*, the ideologies behind the utopian promises of the “American Dream” are rearticulated in the form of a techno-utopia that recruits immigrants of color to become sleep dealers outsourced in the global market by virtual reality technology, and places them in a nightmare dystopian reality. Sleep dealer workers become almost entirely objectified when they transfer their life-energy and affective labor onto a robot that they virtually control, and this represents a new era of surrogate humanity that uses robots to replace humans (particularly vulnerable populations like Mexican immigrants). Even though this film portrays a dystopian future, Memo, Luz, and Rudy do engage in a more explicit critical dystopia by reclaiming their power of this virtual technology and using Rudy’s military drone to blow up the dam. This moment of victory is fleeting, however, because the border can most certainly be rebuilt, and this group disbands immediately after and the fight for a better future seems to end when they go their separate ways. Again, like Chris from *Get Out*, Memo is also the lone-hero at the end and even echoes the philosophy of Don Chipote by returning to his rural farmland in Mexico and rejecting all virtual technology, a return to his roots, but also a less transformative approach into the future. In other words, *Sleep Dealer* offers a promising path toward a critical dystopia, but it is *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* that achieves a true critical dystopia that enacts transformative change through community organizing and activism, seeks to dismantle powerful and oppressive structures, and begins world making for better futures and records them in a future-history archive.

In my final chapter titled, “Reshaping Our Futures with Critical Dystopias and Future-History Archives in Rosaura Sánchez’s and Beatrice Pita’s *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*,” I

analyze the novella *Lunar Braceros* 2125-2148 and the multifaceted perspectives it illuminates regarding immigration and labor initiatives, settler colonialism and remapping of nation-states, interplanetary travel, making the commons, and preserving cultural memories in a future-history archive that traces the long histories of violence, oppression and genocide from the past, present, and now future of people of color in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> As you read the story, there is a sense of not only discussing history, but also historicizing the present, and recognizing that we are part of (re)shaping history (since it often repeats itself) as we enter the future. I define a future-history archive through my interpretation of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s theory from *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* that states our future imaginings emerge from a *future past* and is constantly influx among our past, present and future. I argue a future-history archive is just as necessary as a critical dystopia because it preserves the cultural memories of the past and present of people of color that are threatened with being excluded or erased in "official" archives. For example, in *Lunar Braceros*, not only are we moving through this future-history as a living archive, but the protagonist, Lydia, explains what is at stake when she takes a job where she is tasked with purging historical memory that is not in favor of the nation-state, and the moral dilemma she faces in preserving the cultural memory of people of color and telling the truth about these oppressive histories. Her resistance and activism ultimately land her a prison sentence as a *moon teco*, where she is sent on an interplanetary dystopian nightmare on the moon with many other people of color who are either forced there by choice (to provide income for their family) or

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<sup>20</sup> The immigration and labor initiatives refer to programs like the Bracero Program (1942), Operation Wetback (1954), Arizona's SB 1070 (2010), the Muslim Ban (2017) and more recently the human rights violations of immigrants (mostly Central American) being detained at the border, or having their children taken away from them. Examples of the settler colonialism and remapping I refer to are the Indian Removal Act (1830), forced cultural assimilation of Native Americans, especially in schools (19<sup>th</sup> century), and the fight to protect Native lands today such as the Dakota Access Pipelines and Standing Rock's #DAPL movement. The most striking example in this novella are the "undesirables" of homeless and poor populations that are forced into a highly-surveilled Reservation called the "Res." Finally, the concept of "making the commons" comes from Hardt and Negri's *Commonwealth* (2009).

punishment. But even on the moon, Lydia and her partner, Frank, encounter a virtual specter of his brother whom they believe is alive, but was killed, and this underscores the manipulation of these utopian promises by the nation-state to improve their lives so that they can erase their histories from the archive and the world altogether. Despite the nation-states' utopian dream to remove undesirables by segregating them in Reservations on Earth, or sending them away on the moon, there are enclaves of resistance that exist in the Amazon, specifically Chinganaza. At Chinganaza, there is a return to the idea of making the commons, a community uncorrupted by the outside world, but consistently preyed upon for its natural resources. While this serves as a utopian haven, Lydia recognizes that it is only a temporary escape from the dystopian realities of their world, and that true change will only happen with a critical dystopia and adding to a future-history archive to be shared as a resource and tool for preservation. I refer to work on settler colonialism by scholars such as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Aziz Rana, Jodi Byrd, and Mishuana Goeman. I also use theoretical concepts such as *archisme* from Deborah R. Vargas and "warm data" from Gayatri Gopinath that reinforce the significance of creating a future-history archive. This novella consistently engages in social justice and activism from the beginning to end, and the critical dystopia and enclaves of resistance that emerge as a result, urge people of color to challenge dominant structures that seek to oppress and erase them, and build communities in solidarity to overthrow these unjust systems. *Lunar Braceros* is presented as a fragmented collection of stories for a reason, it is a future-history archive that does not simply recount histories to us, but reminds us that history repeats itself and that only revolutionary world making and resistance will create a future where people of color will not have to continually suffer to survive, and will be finally heard and seen. I end my chapter with this novella because it explicitly interrogates our past, present and possible future, and poses the thought-provoking

question: how will we write ourselves into the future? I argue this novel urges us to *practice* speculative fiction, historicize our present, and participate in enclaves of resistance alongside the long list of metaphorical living archives we have read with Hopkins, Venegas, Butler, Peele, Rivera, and Sánchez and Pita.

I chose to discuss *Sleep Dealer* and *Lunar Braceros* in this final part of *Reclaiming the Future* because they are representative of science fiction in the traditional sense (such as the cyberpunk genre and narratives about space-travel/colonizing other planets) but offer the nuanced examinations and critiques of race, class, and structural inequalities that I find at the heart of most works of speculative fiction written by people of color. In addition to the science fictional elements, these two stories are unique in how they situate space in the future. For example, *Sleep Dealer* plays with the idea of space through virtual reality and interconnected global networks but takes place in Mexico for the most part. *Lunar Braceros* completely reimagines and remaps the future of the US into the nation-state Cali-Texas and widens the perspective even further by transporting us to a new world entirely: the moon. These two texts help us think about the critical dystopias emerging outside of the US and on a global and even interplanetary scale. These narratives also urge us to think about our current technological innovations in virtual reality, global outsourcing and the future of labor, immigration policies, and discoveries we are bound to make as we continue exploring space and the universe. Thus, the future rests in our hands. Will we continue to accept false utopian promises? Continue to struggle in dystopian conditions? Or will we participate in a critical dystopia and rewrite and reclaim the future?

In the conclusion, titled “Speculative Fiction in Practice for World Making, Community Building, and Teaching Today” of *Reclaiming the Future*, I discuss the impact of speculative



fiction as a practice of world making among other disciplines and scholars, and how it can be used in our classrooms as a speculative tool of knowledge using the digital humanities to engage our communities in interactive and critical knowledge production about our past, present and future. I argue that teaching science fiction and speculative fiction can have a transformative effect on our students, especially historically underrepresented groups. In my conclusion, I discuss my own teaching methods at San Diego Miramar Community College teaching an introductory English composition and writing course, with a science fiction and speculative fiction approach. Although my courses discuss works by classical science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov and H.G. Wells, we also read works by more “genre-bending” writers such as Philip K. Dick, James Tiptree Jr., and Ursula K. Le Guin, and works by writers of color such as W.E.B Du Bois, Samuel Delany, Octavia E. Butler, and Ted Chiang.<sup>21</sup> The students participating in the honors component of my course develop a Scalar website where they discuss issues of climate change that refer not only to our readings on the topic, but on extrapolations and forecasting based upon current events happening in the world.<sup>22</sup> I believe using science fiction and speculative fiction provides my students with a space to be creative and think about their futures in new ways, and many students expressed having a deeper appreciation for this genre and the larger arguments it makes about humanity.

I also discuss my experience leading a team of interdisciplinary graduate students from the humanities, social sciences, visual arts, and STEM fields to create a science fiction choose-your-own-adventure game we created called Front|eras. We completed a year-long program

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<sup>21</sup> James Tiptree Jr. was the male pseudonym for the female SF writer Alice B. Sheldon.

<sup>22</sup> Scalar is an online platform created by developers and academics at USC that allows scholarship to be shared widely online. One of my students created a Scalar that discussed the slums in Brazil as an already existing dystopia and way of life. I wanted my students to learn about a new digital platform, Scalar, to engage in digital humanities work and share their work in a more interactive format.

called “San Diego 2049” with UC San Diego’s Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination and School of Global Policy and Strategy and presented our work at the final event and at Comic Con in July 2019. We created this game using the digital story telling platform, Twine, to capture all our individual interests, stories and expertise. Our game envisions San Diego in 2049 as a technological playground, made up primarily of Virtual Reality (VR) tourism and leisure, sustained by a labor force made up of Mexican immigrants and refugees who cross the border every day to cater to these elites using the technology as VR workers. Despite the dystopian world we have imagined, we also create enclaves of resistance, such as the radical group called ContraVR that seeks to hack in and eventually overthrow the unjust system that perpetuates larger structural issues of racism, classism, and other inequalities in our seemingly progressive future. I discuss our process developing the game, our thought-experiments about the future, and the significance of practicing world making. Our game focuses on making marginalized voices more visible in this futuristic space, and I plan to share this project with the wider San Diego community and integrate mini student projects like this one into my curriculum, to encourage and empower others to think about what is truly at stake in their present and how they take an active role in shaping their futures. Ultimately, we hope this project inspires others to think critically about the future and engage in world making practices that can spur change to create better and more equitable futures.

My conclusion shifts from a literary and cultural studies analysis to a reflection on the application and practice of speculative fiction and the knowledge production this generates in the classroom, community, and society. While literature and cultural studies are at the root of theorizing and knowledge production for speculative fiction, I demonstrate how using digital tools and the digital humanities can expand its influence and inspire others to get involved, or at

least take part in the conversation. The goal digital humanities projects like Front|eras (and hopefully futures ones) is to emphasize how people of color can use speculative fiction to reimagine entirely new worlds despite living through histories of dystopia and being disillusioned by utopian promises. I want to urge our generation to change the course of history and create, reimagine, and reclaim a future world where they will be included, recognized, and valued for their cultural histories, knowledge, and practices.

## Part I: Speculative Fictions from the Early 20th Century

### Chapter 1: Resisting and Reproducing Racist Science with Speculative Technology in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*

“Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs — religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history.” — Pauline E. Hopkins, *Contenting Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900)

A comet hits New York and completely wipes out the city, except for a white woman and a black man. Coming from two different worlds, these two characters must move past and transcend the racism constructed by their society's past to enter a new world where they can recognize and value the humanity in one another. This is the premise of W.E.B. Du Bois's 1920 short story “The Comet,” but despite its hopeful message, the characters learn they are not the only ones left, and when they find their respective families, they return back to life as it was before: unchanged by the institutions of race and class that persist even in a dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenario such as this one. Du Bois's short story is an example of speculative fiction that underscores deeper issues of race and class that draw from its historical moment of heightened racial tensions during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Sheree Thomas's *Dark Matter* anthology includes Du Bois's short story to convey that black people were writing science fiction long before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Du Bois is well-known for his contributions to the literary world, but there was another contemporary who was writing even earlier at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and whose work is not as widely recognized: Pauline Hopkins. Hopkins, like Du Bois, wrote to uplift black people and aimed to advance her race in society. Even though there

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<sup>23</sup> I am referring to racial tensions that emerged after the Reconstruction Period and persisted with Jim Crow into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

was a surge of scholars in the 1970s who rediscovered and wrote about Hopkins's work, one of her texts *Of One Blood, or, the Hidden Self* (1902-3), is one I feel needs deeper consideration as an example of speculative fiction and even Afrofuturism. In this chapter, I argue that Hopkins's *Of One Blood* should be reclassified as a work of speculative fiction because it extrapolates on racist science and medical experimentations on black people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and challenges these Western practices that tried to build a utopian and progressive future, through a hybridized tool I call speculative technology. I will provide a more in-depth definition of speculative technology later in my chapter, but here I want to emphasize that this tool places value on African knowledge production, specifically mysticism and the occult, giving power back to the black protagonist, Reuel Briggs. On the other hand, I analyze the complexity of this tool since it must be used to perform an experimentation on another black person, specifically a black woman named Dianthe, and reinforces gender and racial hierarchies that contribute to the objectification and erasure of black women's bodies, minds, and spirits. Ultimately, I argue that Reuel sacrifices his Western identity in favor of his African one, so that he may pursue a future in the utopian ancient African city of Telassar. Even though Reuel views the US as a symbol of progress, this story suggests that racism will always be a barrier to a black man, and thus the only option is to return to one's African past. I argue that this return to the African homeland signifies an unfulfilled critical dystopia because this story suggests that the black community can only survive and thrive *outside* of the US and avoids initiating change for those still living there. I do, however, believe this story serves as a work of speculative fiction that establishes the foundation for issues later on such as black women's rights over their bodies, or brain and body transplantations on black people, that get further explored in part two of my dissertation with Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* and Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*.

Pauline Hopkins was born in 1859 and spent most of her life in Boston, Massachusetts. Her familial upbringing and social circles informed the work that she did and the literature she generated on the conditions of African Americans during the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>24</sup> In Hanna Wallinger's *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, she explains that Hopkins's main concern in her work was about the "progress of her race," particularly the "women of her race" and the "improvement of America" (4). Like black feminists later in the 20th century, Hopkins held "feminist ideals [that] sometimes collided with her race allegiance" and therefore, her work understandably resonates with women during the 1970s, which contributed to the wealth of scholarship that emerged during the late 1970s about her work (Wallinger 8, 13). As an editor for *Colored American Magazine* (working alongside other notable figures, such as Booker T. Washington), Hopkins held an important role from 1900 to 1904, when she published many articles and serialized literary works, such as *Of One Blood*, in the periodical. For the most part, though, scholarship about Hopkins's work primarily focuses on "the melodrama, the local-color/regionalist movement, the sentimental and domestic novel, the utopian novel, the detective plot, the romance, the African American women's club movement, and many other subjects revolving around a revision of the existing canon" (Wallinger 13). My chapter, however, provides an analysis of Hopkins's work through the lens of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism and reclassifies it as such, but also highlights the socio-historical connections to medical and scientific histories of exploitation and experimentation performed on black people and black bodies, which is derived from the comprehensive studies found in Harriet A. Washington's

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<sup>24</sup> According to *The Unruly Voice*, she was the great-grand-niece to the New Hampshire black poet and political activist James Whitfield. She was also related to Nathaniel and Thomas Paul, black activist abolitionist from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (McKay 2).

*Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present.*

I use Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid* as a secondary source to trace the long history of violence upon black bodies and black life to serve the US's utopian pursuits of scientific and medical progress. Black people have suffered the physical deaths of this experimentation and exploitation and have passed down the fears and psychological trauma for generations. I argue that *Of One Blood*'s Dianthe suffers from this psychological trauma through hypnotism and the trance-like state she endures. Turning back to the history of physical experimentation, in the 19th century black slaves and poor free blacks were targeted as "clinical material" and used for public dissections or surgical experimentations for the sake of teaching their students in these clinical trials. Franny Nudelman states in *John Brown's Body: Slavery Violence, & the Culture of War*, "For those people, death brought further subjugation to violent social order; postmortem dissection was the final insult direct at bodies long subject to abuse" (7). Public dissections and exhibiting black bodies were a form of pedagogy medical doctors used with their students, and Washington explains that, "Like circuses, clinics and hospitals had an abundance of uses for the displayed African American body. After the mid-nineteenth century, a supply of black bodies was key to the primacy of the hospital as the new center for American medical instruction and treatment" (103). Ultimately, Western medicine and science taught white physicians to "view these bodies [African Americans] as expendable" and even then "black bodies were medically exploited even after death – via autopsy and dissection" (Washington 114). Black people were not only targeted when they were alive, but also in death, experiencing what Washington calls a "postmortem racism" that reinforced black people's

generational trauma and fear of seeking out those in the medical profession.<sup>25</sup> Washington states, “For blacks, anatomical dissection meant even more: It was an extension of slavery into eternity, because it represented a profound level of white control over their bodies, illustrating that they were not free even in death” (125). This medical abuse extends well into the 20th century as well with eugenics, sterilization abuse on black women and poor women of color, and experimentation, which I discuss in further detail in my chapters on *Wild Seed* and *Get Out*.<sup>26</sup> Activists and scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to properly define black selfhood beyond the color of one’s skin or body, whether it was through the symbol of blood, ancestral roots in Ethiopia, or intellect such as the Talented Tenth; and thus, the concept of the New Negro became the much-debated topic of the time, and these questions emerge in Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* as Reuel grapples with his identity as a black man who passes for white.<sup>27</sup>

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the production of more black art and literature, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. Scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois were extremely invested in uplifting the race and expressed the importance of producing art; he explains: “We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and the highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one.” As a result, this uplift ideology assumed that the ideal “New Negro,” must come from an intelligent and higher class. But the New Negro debate

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<sup>25</sup> For example, doctors (especially at university hospitals) had a high demand to learn more about the human anatomy through dissection and autopsies, and as a result, hired “night doctors” to rob graves (the majority belonging to black people) and then the bodies were tossed aside as “just another heap of discarded training materials” (Washington 122).

<sup>26</sup> For example, black people were the targeted “experiments” for the notorious Tuskegee Syphilis study that monitored black men for forty years and pretended to give them treatment (even when a cure was found) to study the disease for as long as possible and denied them the proper care. As a result, many of them died of this disease (Washington 157).

<sup>27</sup> The Talented Tenth is a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to encourage black people to become successful through education and elevating their status in careers. This concept, however, was criticized because it assumed black people could only be successful through education, and not through work they may have been doing in a trade profession.



was challenged by other scholars who believed that black people and black culture could not simply be represented with this elitist interpretation. Writers like Alain Locke responded to Du Bois's elitist interpretation of the New Negro when he wrote *New Negro* in 1925 to disprove this theory and demonstrate that there could not be a group of elites leading black people, but rather a "collective consciousness" was needed for them to progress.<sup>28</sup> Kevin K. Gaines also explains in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* that "Elite African Americans were replicating, even as they contested, the uniquely American racial fictions upon which liberal conceptions of social reality and 'equality' were founded" (3). Uplift ideology and the concept of the New Negro also drew upon biological questions such as blood, which Hopkins addresses in her novel. Jennie A. Kassanoff explains in her chapter from *The Unruly Voice* titled, "'Fate Has Linked Us Together': Blood, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*," that one approach Hopkins uses for blood is to demonstrate its connection to a monogenist doctrine, or belief that all people come from a common racial ancestry (165). Hopkins writes about a seemingly ancient utopian African city called Telassar, that draws from a royal Ethiopian lineage and appears to subscribe to this same belief in the New Negro as representative of an intellectual or elitist status. Wallinger notes Hopkins wrote about the "ancient glory of Egypt and Ethiopia, and its desire to instill race pride," yet she was criticized later on for this because scholars like Gwendolyn Brooks felt her work's "references to the higher race and Anglo-Saxon superiority" diminished the potential impact it could have for uplifting black people in a way driven more through social change and

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<sup>28</sup> This information about W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke is from *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* chapter on "African American Theory and Criticism 1. Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement." Also, scholars since then have built on some of these ideas, such as the "historical consciousness" from Gordon Fraser's article "Transnational Healing in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self*" and its discussion about the psychological trauma of a diasporic African history that has been erased by oppression and colonization, and the desire for a cultural identity to be fulfilled, or community to belong to.

community activism (12). Scholars since then have built on some of these ideas about blood, such as Jill A. Bergman's article "The Motherless Child in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*," which explores how Reuel "strives instead for identification with the father of white patriarchal society" since he is a product of a "tainted" kind of blood, or miscegenation (291).

My chapter departs from these arguments because it explores racist science and speculative fiction beyond the concepts of blood. I consider Mandy A. Reid's article "Utopia Is in the Blood: The Bodily Utopias of Martin R. Delany and Pauline Hopkins" to be a great starting point for discussing how racist science constructs the idea of "racial utopias" (92). Reid explores this possible utopia through what she theorizes as "(re)visionary scientific epistemology" that idealizes an early African Ethiopian race that is figured by the seemingly utopian society in Telassar (94). Reid, however, is still focused on the concept of blood and specifically how it is circulated through women as "visual spectacle" that allows for the racial utopia to be fulfilled, but I argue this is only made possible by the elimination of all familial and cultural ties to the West (97).

I begin my analysis by providing the definition of a key term I will be using throughout this chapter: speculative technology. To provide context from a socio-historical and speculative fiction context, I build upon the works of Brit Rusert's *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*, Susan Gillman's *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*, and Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid*. I use Rusert's work to demonstrate how speculative fiction, and specifically the speculative technology created by Reuel, is a tool that challenges Western medicine and science as a form of resistance, especially from objectification, spectacularization through experimentation, and the erasure of black people and bodies with historically violent histories in scientific and medical

spaces.<sup>29</sup> I also build on Rusert's term "speculative fugitive science" which she defines as the "rich imaginative landscape of science to meditate on slavery and freedom, as well as the contingencies of black subjectivity and existence" to convey how experimentation on black bodies is reimagined by Hopkins through a speculative technology that challenges Western practices and validates black existence and identity, and African knowledge production (18). Building on Gillman's work, I refer to the terms "the occult" and "racial hypnotism" to suggest how these concepts fall under the realm of speculative fiction and help to shape the speculative technology that Reuel practices. Specifically, Gillman defines the occult as the "quasi-mystical, quasi-scientific mode to imagine racial pasts and even the supernatural" and racial hypnotism is applied in *Of One Blood* to represent a sense of black inferiority and white superiority that was more effective for gaining control over others, as opposed to racial violence (8). Gillman's concepts are important for my definition of speculative technology because they represent the manipulative way this tool is used when gaining control over one's mind (like Dianthe's) to reinforce gender and racial hierarchies. Gillman's work also explains how Hopkins's novel achieves a historical consciousness that weaves between the past and present, and this is especially pertinent to my overarching argument that speculative fiction written by people of color extrapolates from and speculates on the past, present, and future.<sup>30</sup> While Gillman reads this novel as a "race melodrama," I focus on her terms the occult and racial hypnotism in my argument for rereading this work through a speculative fiction lens.<sup>31</sup> Rusert's and Gillman's theoretical terms are useful for defining my keyword speculative technology because they

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<sup>29</sup> Rusert explains that "spectacularization" upon black bodies happened when they were brought to a scientific lecture or performance to entertain or teach practitioners (120)

<sup>30</sup> This refers to William James's psychology or W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness"

<sup>31</sup> Gillman defines race melodrama as the "irreducible historical identity of race itself as melodrama in the United States" (4). Gillman argues that when melodrama gets racialized it then becomes relational and contains intersectionalities among gender, nation, political, economic, and socio-cultural differences (6).

represent the problems in racist science and medicine of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that black people endured, and in some cases characters challenge or echo those practices in *Of One Blood*.

Washington's *Medical Apartheid* documents the historical and generational impact of the trauma black people have suffered as a result of racist science and medicine, especially experiments where both black slaves or poor free blacks were used as clinical material for physicians to experiment and learn to perform surgery on, often without their consent. Further, Rusert's term "spectacularization" resonates with Washington's work because black people were publicly dissected or surgically experimented on for the sake of teaching their students in these clinical trials as I have noted above. In *Of One Blood*, Reuel is in a unique position since he possesses the power of the occult and mysticism and attempts to bring them together with his Western training in science and medicine to generate an entirely new tool: a speculative technology. In Edward Bruce Bynum's *The African Unconscious: Roots of African Mysticism and Modern Psychology*, he explains that, "In our own day, particularly in the Western world, science and religion have changed places in terms of which one decides what is reality and what is most likely fantasy" and thus, this is why this speculative technology is significant for reimagining a realm where reality and something perceived as "fantasy" can co-exist to generate entirely new forms of science and medicine (104). Although, this novel ultimately rejects the possibility for this speculative technology to fully function in the Western world. This speculative technology is also inherently flawed because from a gendered perspective it gives men power, and leaves black women especially, with nothing. As James Kiernan explains in *The Power of the Occult in Modern Africa: Continuity and Innovation in the Renewal of African Cosmologies*, the occult, "contains both darkness and light, both goodness and evil, each in constant contention with the other" which is reflected through the impact of Reuel's speculative

technology when it is used on Dianthe (6). Ultimately, this speculative technology is a hybrid of Western practice and African mysticism and the occult, which validates African knowledge production, but when it is used, it places a black man (Reuel) in the role of a physician performing an experiment on a black woman who objectifies and dehumanizes her, and this undermines its full potential to uplift black people in the scientific and medical field in the West.

Reuel's speculative technology uses the knowledge of African mysticism and the occult to challenge Western ideologies about science and medicine to suggest the possibility for a new practice that is invested in and validates African knowledge production to advance the future of the field in new ways. Reuel is portrayed as "a close student of what might be termed 'absurdities' of supernatural phenomena or *mysticism*, best known to the every-day world as 'effects of the imagination,'" which conveys his research interests in the possibility of healing powers that move beyond Western practices (Hopkins 2). This excerpt figures African practices as stemming from the "imagination" and therefore, Reuel's profession as a medical student is threatened by the "absurdities" of incorporating these methods into his practice.<sup>32</sup> This passage illustrates what was at stake for a black man like Reuel who was trying to elevate his status as a medical professional by overcoming racial barriers. Moreover, this perspective aligns with Du Bois's Talented Tenth, but in this case, Reuel's ability to progress and uplift his race is ironically threatened by his cultural heritage. This secretive study also resonates with Rusert's idea of "shadow archives" where black intellectuals participate in scientific production, and is exactly what Reuel is doing when developing this speculative technology (8).<sup>33</sup> Reuel challenges

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) explains imagination in two ways, "Primary imagination is common to all humans: it enables us to perceive and make sense of the world. It is a creative function and thereby repeats the divine act of creation. The secondary imagination enables individuals to transcend the primary imagination – not merely to perceive connections but to make them" (*British Library*).

<sup>33</sup> For example, black intellectuals such as Martin Delany produced scientific knowledge and attempted to earn his MD with a formal education at Harvard Medical School but was overwhelmed by the racism he encountered. As a result, he wrote his own texts and ethnologies to contribute to the field (Rusert 155).

assumptions that African knowledge production is merely of one's "imagination" by using it to create a new science and medicine beyond Western limitations.<sup>34</sup> Yet Kiernan warns against this practice since, "The nature of the occult can itself be elusive" and adds that it is, "what is concealed, obscure, mysterious, secret, sinister or forbidden" which suggests that the results of the speculative technology are unknown in terms of what true powers it will hold, and the negative impacts it could have (5). More important though, Reuel's creation of this speculative technology challenges racist science and stereotypes and gives power back to black people in this scenario. History has presented similar situations, such as Henry Box Brown, who is an example of Rusert's fugitive science, since he rewrote his narrative of emancipation by combining Africanist mysticism and mesmerism in his performances (133). Brown's performances transformed "the popular stage into a site of experimentation, his performances suggested material ways that natural science might be linked to resistance, rather than to domination" (Rusert 143). Reuel adopts a similar approach by resisting traditional Western scientific and medical research and practices. In this case, Reuel's speculative technology attempts to capture both Western and African practices to eliminate racial barriers and prejudice in medical and scientific spaces.<sup>35</sup> Reuel's pursuits prove difficult though, as he attempts to navigate between the real world and the mystical and supernatural world that transports him into new territory that Western medicine and science rejects.

While Reuel's speculative technology is meant to validate African knowledge production, since it engages so much with supernatural and mystical elements, this limits its

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<sup>34</sup> On the African expedition later in the story, the lead scientist explains how Western medicine and science has been ingrained to reject contributions from Africa and maintain a racial division between white and black, "Science has done its best to separate the race from Northern Africa, but the evidence is with the Ethiopians" and Reuel is attempting to bridge the two with his speculative technology (Hopkins 99).

<sup>35</sup> Reuel's attempt to bring together African mysticism and Euro-American Western practice for medicine and science offers "different traditions or systems of the occult as the syncretic meeting ground between the two civilizations" (Gillman 60).

acceptance as “hard science” in Western medicine and suggests Reuel’s need to move away from the West and into Africa to find a place where this tool can be properly supported. The nature of the occult and mysticism is seemingly fantastical and creates a “parallel world beyond the reach of sentient sight, that is peopled by witches, ghouls, ghosts, spirits, demons and deities” (Kiernan 5-6). On the other hand, the occult is meant to be an acceptable scientific practice and “marker to distinguish their nonmaterialist methodology from the empiricism of the spiritualists...an accepted scientific theory and methodology in the study of mystical, magical, or supernatural traditions” although this is not the case in this novel (Gillman 48). Yet these “parallel worlds,” “sentient sight,” and “nonmaterialist methodology,” are what make Reuel’s speculative technology into a tool that can awaken one from the dead and can be used to control one’s mind and spirit through mesmerism and hypnosis. In the novel, when the topic of the supernatural arises, Reuel explains to his friends that they are not simply myths, but rather, a challenge to Western human logic: “For my own part, I have never believed that the whole mental world is governed by the faculties we understand and can reduce to reason or definite feelings” (Hopkins 22). Reuel’s critique appears contradictory because, as a medical doctor, he is supposed to be driven by hard scientific research and reason; yet he believes in this spiritual African mysticism. Historically, others like him, such as Du Bois, believed that the occult represented “less a singular, mystical belief system than a set of knowledge fields, institutions, and social movements that could posit hidden –occulted – correspondence uniting, or dividing, the peoples on the global color line” (Gillman 152). In other words, the liberating aspects of Reuel’s speculative technology lie within his belief in spiritual African mysticism and the occult to gain access into a world beyond the one of Western ideas of “reason.” This statement also suggests an attempt to demystify the logic or even emotion that supports racist ideologies and how the mind

can be reshaped to think about humanity and race differently.<sup>36</sup> Reuel's speculative technology demonstrates how practicing African mysticism and the occult gives him access to a different world that offers alternatives (a type of shadow archive) to the technical or logical explanations of humanity outside of racial discourse. This hope to eliminate racial prejudice in medical and scientific fields is important because Reuel is ashamed of being black, and thus, developing this speculative technology signifies some hope for creating a future where his contributions will be lauded rather than rejected because it will be more important that he is human than that he is black. As he continues to study this practice and accept its power, he eventually gains the confidence to share his speculative technology with the other doctors when the opportunity arises. He hopes that this tool can be accepted by Western medical and scientific practice, but he quickly learns it cannot and therefore, must return to an African past to unlock the true potential of this tool.

Reuel becomes further immersed in using this tool and practice (specifically after experimenting on Dianthe) and I argue that he reaches a barrier and must return to Africa and reject the West completely to gain full agency of his powers and protect the future of black people in the utopian city of Telassar. Despite Reuel's studies of African mysticism and the occult, he believes that he needs an opportunity to showcase his speculative technology, and Dianthe serves as the catalyst for launching him further into the realm of African mysticism and the occult. Reuel's desire to experiment on a subject is inherently part of Western medicine and scientific methodologies. Furthermore, Reuel passes for white and since he is experimenting on a

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<sup>36</sup> For example, Washington explains the extreme racism and desire to segregate black people from the medical/scientific community with physicians such as Thomas Murrell who explained, "the future of the Negro lies more in the research laboratory than in school" and Harry Bailey who reminisced during the 1960s that, "[It was] cheaper to use Niggers than cats because they were everywhere and cheap experimental animals" (10). These illustrate the struggles for black people to overcome their status as simply objects in medicine and science and reiterates the importance of Reuel's speculative technology to challenge that position and reclaim some power.



black woman's body, this shows his participation in the larger group of Western medical doctors that comprised a "matrix they characterized as racist, rapacious, and eager to exploit black bodies for medical gain at the cost of health" (Washington 16). Even before the impact of Reuel's speculative technology emerges, his original intentions are grounded in this Western practice of experimenting on black bodies for medical and scientific discovery. Contrary to Western ideology, though, Reuel's speculative tool will not operate to its full capacity within the parameters of Western medicine and science. As a result, Reuel must ultimately reject these Western practices in favor of African mysticism and the occult.

Reuel believe that Dianthe holds the key to gaining some of the power from his speculative technology, but its full powers lie in a higher entity, in this case the resources he later finds in the ancient utopian African city of Telassar:

He believed that he had been drawn into active service for Dianthe by a series of strange coincidences, and the subtle forces of immortality; what future acts this service might require he knew not, he cared not; he registered a solemn promise to perform all tasks allotted him by Infinity, to the fullest extent of his power. (Hopkins 53-54)

Reuel's "active service" for Dianthe is performed by practicing his speculative technology. But using this tool does much more than simply cure Dianthe because it comes with spiritual responsibilities since her mind is affected as well. He refers to these spiritual elements as a force that is derived from "immortality," which evokes the presence of a higher power. This higher power is uncovered when Reuel discovers the hidden African city, Telassar, and unlocks the secrets of his past, present and future to gain the full power over African mysticism and the occult. The two words he uses to define his spiritual connection to his speculative technology are "immortality" and "infinity," which imply a purpose that goes beyond earthly matters and suggest that he must transcend any boundaries in his way to achieve the full extent of his powers.

Reuel's statement conveys that his speculative technology cannot continue to grow with the limited knowledge and resources he has in the West. Nor can he fully gain all the powers by experimenting on Dianthe, as is typical for Western science and medicine. When he takes an African expedition and discovers Telassar, his future and powers become fully realized, particularly when he learns of his responsibility to his people as the long-awaited King Ergamenes, and his duty to protect this community because of his knowledge of Western practices and African mysticism and the occult. Before he makes this discovery, he attempts to integrate his speculative technology into Western medicine and science by performing his experiment on Dianthe, and as a result, reproduces the violent histories of medical and scientific trauma upon black people and black bodies.

Although Reuel's speculative technology is groundbreaking in defying Western science and medicine to bring Dianthe back to life after her "*seeming death*," the consequence of using this tool is the exploitation and objectification of a black woman's body that replicates racist science practices of experimentation on black bodies (Hopkins 29). When Reuel exhibits his experiment on Dianthe among his Western medical colleagues, he is participating in the historically violent experiments performed on black people and in this case, the use of black bodies for medical research, progress, and even a "post-mortem racism." This experiment also resonates with the "night doctors" that stole primarily black bodies from graves so that they could be used by medical students to perform dissections and autopsies (Washington 119). Reuel's ability to bring Dianthe back from the dead alludes to a Dr. Frankenstein, and the figure of the grave robber as well, who was called "a cadaver procurer or 'resurrectionist'" (Washington 122). In other words, Reuel's speculative technology highlights the complexity of

its abilities to challenge Western science and medicine, yet at the same time reinforces those same ideologies through this experimentation, objectification, and postmortem racism.

Reuel's power to determine the life or death of someone connects with his earlier notions of being close to immortality or infinity with this power.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Reuel proclaims that, "He alone could do it," and this boost of confidence is what empowers him to believe that he was "advancing far afield in the mysterious regions of science" and had "stumbled upon the solution of one of life's problems: *the reanimation of the body after seeming death*" (Hopkins 29). In this moment, Reuel conveys his belief in the American utopian ideologies of progress, specifically in the medical and scientific fields. Despite the effects his experiment may have on Dianthe, he believes his speculative technology is necessary to advance the field and his career. Reuel's intentions recall Western doctors who believed their dissections, autopsies, and exhibitions of black bodies would be useful to advancing the field. Nudelman states that anatomists that performed this racial violence by dissecting black bodies believe it was justified because "professionals [were] able to extract knowledge and, by extension, authority from it" and "transformed the dead body, an object of sympathy and identification, into an instrument of professional expertise" (9, 41).<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Reuel's speculative technology is complicated by the fact that it moves beyond the physical limitations of life and death and affects the spirit and mind as well.

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<sup>37</sup> Bynum explains how priests who practice African mysticism and the occult "hovered on the ledge between life and death," and this reflects Reuel's own role to choose between the two (81).

<sup>38</sup> Washington also explains the "overrepresentation of black body parts and organs in transplantation and in industry is driven by legal and medical policies such as the 1987 amendment of the UAGA, which licensed the nonconsensual retrieval of body parts" and this is especially important when thinking about how experimentation on black bodies is further exacerbated in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and white people's brains are transplanted into a black person's body to completely take over their lives (139). Moreover, Nudelman states that, "Lifting the corpse out of social and religious contexts and establishing it as a source of valuable knowledge, dissection not only exclude the dead from a religious narrative of burial and resurrection but also from forms of community that depended on the body as a figure for common experience" (7-8).

In his experimentation, Reuel does not simply reassemble the physical inanimate parts of a whole to bring one back to life such as Dr. Frankenstein does. Instead, Reuel reshapes the spirit and mind of his subject, Dianthe, to revive the body. Thus, even though Reuel's speculative technology repeats some racist science, it also challenges it because this procedure consists of augmenting and changing the spirit and mind as part of African mysticism and the occult which is "to *re-member*, to put back together again the consciousness of the finite individual material life with the infinite collective and luminous life of the great spiritual being" (Bynum 82). In this case, Reuel is exerting a type of metaphorical dissection as he "re-members" Dianthe's mind and spirit by occupying this role as the spiritual being who has the power from his speculative technology to bring her back to life. Yet the implications of "re-membering" Dianthe's mind and spirit illustrate her enslavement in life, death, and spirit, so that her life is never her own again. More important, Dianthe represents the experimentation on black bodies, particularly black women's bodies, and the violence and oppression they have endured as subjects of experimentation and erasure, a psychological and generational trauma that continues with issues of reproductive oppression, sexual violence, and sterilization abuse in the 1970s.

Reuel uses his speculative technology to experiment on Dianthe and reimagine racist science performances from the past to objectify her and suggest her inferiority as a human being and how using her black body is justified because it ensures Western scientific and medical progress. Historically, black people (with slave or free status) were being preyed upon to be used for experimentation to enhance utopian ideas of medical and scientific progress that created "a larger culture that encompassed enslavement, segregation, and less dramatic forms of racial inequity" (Washington 9). Moreover, "race scientists often doubled as scientific showmen," and tended to "externalize and fix blackness within evolutionary hierarchies through the public

exhibition of racialized bodies” (Rusert 113, 119). While I plan to discuss the gender and racial hierarchies that emerge in this narrative, for this particular scene I want to illustrate how Reuel represents a kind of racist scientific showman who justifies the experimentation on and objectification of a black woman by treating her the same as the animals he has used in his previous studies. When Dianthe first arrives at the hospital she is pronounced dead by the doctors, and Reuel deduces that she is in a state of “suspended animation” that he states can be resolved because “consciousness may be restored or the dead brought back to life. I have numberless times in the past six months restored consciousness to dogs and cats after rigor mortis had set in” (Hopkins 31-32). Reuel’s belief that the trials of his speculative technology on animals can be applied in the same way to Dianthe suggests his desire to hide how integrating African mysticism and the occult might alter one’s mind and spirit, so that he may justify using this new practice.

At the same time, it highlights the vulnerability of black women. Black women have been subject to brutally violent procedures, such as experiments performed by doctors on unanesthetized genitalia during slavery (Washington 2). Moreover, Reuel’s comparison of this black woman’s current state to animals resonates with some of the rhetoric used to justify using black people for these medical and scientific experimentations; “Their skins were thought thicker, their brains smaller; they were characterized as sexually precocious and intellectually retarded” (Washington 108). Reuel also sees this moment as an opportunity to elevate his status in the medical and scientific field in hopes that his true identity as a black man will not be discovered and he can attain prosperity and success. Dianthe presents an opportunity for Reuel to capitalize on, like that of physicians who displayed their work on black bodies in medical journals to boost their reputations or teach their students. Reuel’s selfish intentions continue once

he revives Dianthe and puts her under a mind control trance so that he can give her a new identity and elevate his status by marrying a woman who passes for white to complete his picture of a perfect life unaffected by racism and classism. Despite Reuel's success in the medical community, the way he attempts to integrate his speculative technology in the West illustrates the influences of racist science and this inability to break away (even as a black man) from a society that treats black people as sub-human. Reuel is like anatomists who dissected black bodies not only for extracting knowledge, but also "exploited the bodies of the powerless as they worked to produce a serviceable corpse devoid of identity" (Nudelman 49). His practices thus contribute to the long history of exploitation and oppression of black people's bodies, and even worse, apply a mind control power through African mysticism and the occult that gives Reuel total control over Dianthe and her identity.

Reuel's ability to control Dianthe's mind and spirit with his speculative technology suggests how this tool risks performing a spiritual exploitation that resonates with the psychological and generational trauma that black people have inherited after years of violence and oppression on their bodies and lives in the medical and scientific field. For example, Washington explains, "By the mid-nineteenth century, African Americans had already associated Western medicine with punishment, loss of control over their most intimate bodily functions, and degrading public displays" as well as, "brutal violence by physicians who refused to acknowledge their pain" and this has culminated into a distrust of medical practitioners and what she calls "Black iatrophobia" which is her term for a racialized fear of medicine (20, 114). This psychological and generational trauma is an example of Gillman's "racial hypnotism" that she defines as the "practice of engendering in both races a psychic sense of black inferiority and white superiority, a subtle form of social control far more effective than overt racial violence"

(8). Reuel's experiment on Dianthe appears laudable on the surface because he brings her back to life, yet in reality his speculative technology depends upon a type of racial hypnotism and control over Dianthe to make her think she is white, convince her to marry him, and ultimately subject her to a racial violence that echoes the psychological trauma that generations of black people have endured as a result of scientific and medical experimentation.

The idea of a spirit, or as Du Bois termed it, the "Negro soul" which derived from "Negro blood" suggests that blackness would always circulate in one's veins, and therefore, the body of a black person could not be overlooked in racial discourse (Kassanoff 164). Reuel is aware of the difficulties of being a black person, and because he and Dianthe pass as white, he uses his speculative technology to also reimagine the life he can have if they keep their identities hidden from society, despite their African ancestry. Reuel gives Dianthe back her physical life, while simultaneously enslaving her spirit, mind, and soul to eventually erase her identity completely. Reuel confesses to his friend Aubrey, "I mean - it is a dual mesmeric trance! The girl is only partly normal now," and confirms that his speculative technology has successfully brought her into this type of racial hypnotism where he can control her life (Hopkins 35).<sup>39</sup> Dianthe also loses her memories, further complicating her grip on reality and erasing all aspects of her identity buried deep within her.

Dianthe becomes so destabilized in the reality that Reuel has created for her, that she appears to experience a kind of spiritual death or even zombie-like persona, before her final earthly death. Reuel's speculative technology leaves Dianthe in a trance that effectively prevents her from recalling her past, yet these memories permeate her unconscious, particularly her

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<sup>39</sup> Aubrey is not a friend of Reuel or Dianthe, he is the villain of the novel. Further, he is their sibling that was the product of their father's slave mistress, Mira, who is also their mother, and possesses the powers of African mysticism and the occult.

dreams. Before Reuel leaves for Africa, Dianthe confides in him, saying, “Do you know, I sometimes dream or have waking visions of a past time in my life? But when I try to grasp the fleeting memories they leave me groping in darkness” (Hopkins 65). As we know, Reuel will never reveal the truth and Dianthe unknowingly gets the closest to learning of her past through these dreams, although they also foreshadow a deeply conflicted past because Reuel and Aubrey (who both abuse her) are her brothers and the reason she dies.<sup>40</sup> In one dream, Dianthe conjures up, “shapeless, nameless things that lurked and skulked in hidden chambers, waiting the signal to come forth” and this illustrates how the past is attempting to connect with her in the real world so that she may understand the truth, through a “signal” (Hopkins 170).<sup>41</sup> Once Dianthe discovers the disturbing truth of her ancestral lineage (Reuel and Aubrey are her brothers), she takes on a type of “zombie” status that Sarah Juliet Lauro in *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* defines as an “animated corpse,” where even though she is living the real world, she is devoid of her mind and spirit, completely dehumanizing her: “Dianthe lived in another world, unconscious of her own identity” (Hopkins 166). This sentence may also allude to the royal Queen Candace in Telassar who is the suitable wife for King Ergamenes (Reuel) to marry and who resembles Dianthe.<sup>42</sup>

This alternate representation of Dianthe that exists in Africa (Telassar) suggests that like Reuel, who cannot properly be supported and accepted for his speculative technology in Western society, Dianthe also cannot be accepted as the black woman she is in Western society. Rather, her alternate identity and future exists in an African past, but since Reuel leaves her behind in the

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<sup>40</sup> Although Aubrey is the one that poisons Dianthe, I argue that she is killed by both Reuel and Aubrey because Reuel’s speculative technology weakens her and allows her to be controlled by anyone more powerful than her. Aubrey, in this case, takes advantage of her after Reuel goes to Africa.

<sup>41</sup> The ultimate “signal” that Dianthe receives is when she meets Aunt Hannah who knows the secret of their familial relations, and the fact that Dianthe, Aubrey and Reuel are siblings, “Yes, honey; all of one blood” (Hopkins 177).

<sup>42</sup> Queen Candace is who Reuel learns (as King Ergamenes) he is fated to marry and rule Telassar with. When Queen Candace is first introduced, she is illustrated as a dark African woman, but with a likeness to Dianthe.



West, her identity fades away and appears to get consumed by the figure of Queen Candace who ultimately replaces her as Reuel's wife in Telassar. Reuel breaks many of his promises to Dianthe when he finds his utopian dreams in Telassar, and as a result, metaphorically sacrifices a part of his Western identity through Dianthe and what she represented for him. Reuel justifies his use of speculative technology when telling Aubrey, "There is no sin in taking her out of the sphere where she was born. God and science helping me, I will give her life and love and wifehood and maternity and perfect health" (Hopkins 43-44). In other words, Reuel expresses hope that by removing Dianthe from a racist and unjust world and converting her into a white woman who will be his wife, they both can benefit from one another's changed identities to live a successful life in the US. When Reuel leaves for Africa everything changes for him and Dianthe, and she is left to wither away because as a black woman, she will never be able to overcome the barriers of racism and class, and more important, since Reuel has left her, he never gives her the opportunity to do so. This statement also conveys how Reuel asserts his masculinity by ensuring Dianthe possesses the identity of a feminine maternal wife he can take care of.

Even though Reuel's speculative technology does challenge and undermine some Western racist science and medical practices, it is still complicit in some of those practices and also reinforces gender hierarchies by demonstrating how generationally, black and white men have been positioned as superior to black women, and that black women who possess the power of African mysticism and the occult cannot be trusted with it or are stereotyped as hysterical. The experimentation that Reuel performs on Dianthe is problematic because of the way it echoes racist science practices, yet when the roles are reversed, women with knowledge of African mysticism and the occult appear incapable of utilizing its power effectively. For example, women with powers of African mysticism and the occult are perceived as "hysterical" and this

suggests that Reuel's speculative technology is "superior" to simply using these African practices, because he has the formal training from Western medicine and science to properly use it. Reuel also exemplifies the black elites that used uplift ideology that consequently "devised a *moral economy* of class privilege, distinction and even domination *within the race*, often drawing on patriarchal gender conventions as a sign of elite status and 'race progress'" (Gaines 17).

The mother of Reuel, Dianthe and Aubrey, a slave and mistress to Aubrey's father, named Mira, is the source of power that these characters inherit some sort of African mysticism and occult power from, while Reuel was taught it by her directly.<sup>43</sup> Mira's possession of these powers is not represented equally to a man's; rather, she is captured as a hysterical black woman possessed by her powers when she suddenly changes into "a gay, noisy, restless woman, full of irony and sharp jesting. In this case this peculiar metamorphosis always occurred" even though she is called on to perform this way by her master (Hopkins 51). Reuel's speculative technology challenges Western scientific and medical practices, and as a result, it elevates his status to be able to perform a kind of "resurrection" on subjects like Dianthe. In Mira's case, however, when she uses her power she is illustrated as undergoing a transformation or metamorphosis that suggests because she is not tied to a Western medical and scientific background, she is illogical or insane. Since she is perceived as a "restless woman," this illustrates that Mira is unable to control her powers and suggests that she cannot be trusted with it, unlike the males who use it (like Reuel) even though they tend to cause much more damage than she had.

Just as black people and black bodies had been used as clinical material to exhibit for medical students, in a similarly performative way, black women in this case are only valuable

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<sup>43</sup> In one excerpt, Reuel recalls his mother: "He remembered his mother well. From her he had inherited mysticism and occult powers. The nature of the mystic within him was, then, but a dreamlike devotion to the spirit that had swayed his ancestors; it was the shadow of Ethiopia's power. The lotus upon his breast he knew to be a birthmark" (Hopkins 126).

with their African mysticism and occult powers when they are used to entertain others. Dianthe expresses this uncertainty in her powers when she asks Reuel to “give me the benefit of your powerful will,” and says that “Some time the full power will be mine; and mine shall be thine,” thus conveying the fact that despite the shared inheritance of these powers, she feels unworthy and can only find validation from a man (Hopkins 40). Just as Mira’s powers had been abused by Aubrey’s father for entertainment value, Kassanoff argues that Reuel and Aubrey also “seek to reconstruct the heroine’s subjectivity and to appropriate her body” and as a result, their power over Dianthe contributes to the erasure of her identity, spirit and mind, and eventually her physical life (173). Hopkins’s treatment of her female characters in this novel suggests that even though she stated she wanted to uplift black people, especially black women, yet this story is problematic since it positions a black woman as the vulnerable subject of experimentation, or as a stereotypical hysterical and crazed woman unable to wield great powers. More important, though, is the fact that black white-passing men like Reuel and Aubrey’s white father demonstrate how black and white men hold the power of the occult and African mysticism itself, or command others (like Mira) to use it. Beyond just being a man, Reuel also seems to be able to use the powers of African mysticism and the occult because he has developed this speculative technology tool that integrates his Western medical and scientific training with this African knowledge. Unfortunately, he creates and uses this technology at the expense of harming other black people, particularly black women and their bodies, minds, and spirits. When Reuel participates in an African expedition and discovers the ancient hidden city of Telassar, he learns about a rich history and heritage in Africa that he rejected for so long that surpasses anything he had known about medical and scientific progress and stereotypes about black people in the West.

In Telassar, Reuel gains even more power for his speculative technology, yet realizes that the traditional Western ideas of progress for science and medicine, especially with its racial influence, is entirely debunked by this African civilization, and a return to the past is what will propel him and his people into the future. Telassar represents an entirely different utopian imagination than the one Reuel knew in the West. Rather than a society that privileges white people, Telassar is a society comprised entirely of African people. Telassar debunks the utopian ideology that medical and scientific progress can only be found in the West, and that it can only be done by exploitive techniques such as experimentation and objectification, especially on black people. By returning to his African roots and past, Reuel can now reimagine progress in terms of one's cultural heritage and traditions, in this case African mysticism and the occult. Gillman explains that "Occult history concentrates, not on prophecy or futurology, but rather on a hermeneutic of the past's relation to the present. Rather than beginning at the beginning and postulating an origin, occult time works relationally from the present backward" (202). Moreover, Reuel's status is elevated to the highest degree as the long-lost King Ergamenes (because of his lotus birthmark) and therefore, only in Africa has he achieved a royal status and leadership, something he could never do in the West. Gillman argues that "Hopkins's Ethiopianist vision explicitly rewrites the evolutionary narrative of reversion to savagery by predicating the prophetic future of the black race directly on its early greatness" (63). Thus, the creation of a city and society like Telassar is significant partly because it predates science fiction renderings of similar places, such as Marvel's Wakanda in *Black Panther*.<sup>44</sup>

*Black Panther's* Wakanda is also an African utopia that only gives access to those with a tattoo on the inside of their lip to verify they are ancestors to an ancient but advanced world. In

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<sup>44</sup> This comic was originally released in 1966 and adapted into a full-length film in 2018.

Wakanda, their power resource comes from something called vibranium, and in Telassar, it is primarily rooted in practices of the occult, mysticism, and even foresight.<sup>45</sup> Rather than a speculative technology tool like Reuel's, Wakanda relies on vibranium to operate a highly advanced society of science, medicine, and technology. The Telassar civilization also debunks racist science claims and utopian ideas of progress from the West, particularly when the high priest Ai informs Reuel that "They tell me that in many things your modern world is yet in its infancy" to convey that Western progress is lacking when compared to Telassar's accomplishments (Hopkins 119). Ai's statement challenges the perception that Africa is a "backward" society and undermines many of the sentiments stated by Reuel's fellow travelers during the expedition, who defended dehumanizing black people in the US or could not believe a noble African civilization existed.<sup>46</sup>

During Reuel's stay in Telassar, he learns that his speculative technology could never achieve the great power he desired because of the West's limited resources and racist thinking about what constitutes progress in medicine and science. Reuel admits to himself that, "In the heart of Africa was a knowledge of science that all the wealth and learning of modern times could not emulate," and in this moment he comes to the epiphany that everything he knew about Western science and medicine was not true, and that he *can* be successful in a thriving and progressive society as a black man (Hopkins 145). Although, I argue this too can be problematic in the context of racial uplift ideology because Reuel favors the Telassar civilization as part of an elite class and rejects marginalized people in the West. Similarly, Du Bois promoted and

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<sup>45</sup> Reuel earns the power of foresight when he is in Telassar, and this allows him to look to the West and see what is happening with Dianthe and Aubrey. Ultimately, after using his foresight he discovers the wrongs he has committed and tries to return to reconcile with the West before he fully commits to a life in Telassar.

<sup>46</sup> Bynum notes, "The indigenous African was erased from the teaching of history and the unfoldment of human civilization" and this hidden city of Telassar represents the forgotten history that black people have sought to reclaim as a result of the African diaspora (79).

believed that, “the black intelligentsia held the key to race advancement” and like Reuel, forgot about other black people that were not part of that “intelligent” and elite class (Gaines 152).

Even though his speculative technology was influenced by both his African roots and Western training, this tool will become even more enriched by the resources and support available to him in Telassar. Additionally, he will no longer have to be ashamed, nor try to prove himself by using the tool on vulnerable subjects, like Dianthe. Despite all these wonderful discoveries that Reuel makes about himself and his ancient African history, he chooses this utopian reality in Telassar, rather than the dystopian one he left behind in the West, and this does not generate the critical dystopia needed for true change to occur for other black people like him still living in the West.

At the end of *Of One Blood*, Reuel does not reach a critical dystopia because he returns to his African roots, rejects the US and its utopian promises, and does not engage in the world making or community activism that fuels a critical dystopia’s mission to enact change by dismantling oppressive systems for future generations. Rather than being critical of the world around him, he tries to fit into Western society’s standards and even contributes to its racist science by using his speculative technology. Even though Reuel’s speculative technology is a tool that challenges some Western practices because of its influence of African mysticism and the occult, he still uses it to reproduce racist science methods that objectify and exploit black people and black bodies through experimentation and spectacularization. In fact, using his speculative technology on Dianthe reenacts scenes from medical and scientific demonstrations on black bodies for the benefit of teaching medical students and advancing the field. Although Dianthe is not explicitly subjected to horrific physical experimentations, she is put under a type of spiritual and mind control (racial hypnotism), and this is what makes Reuel’s speculative

technology unique. While Reuel attempts to uphold the concept of the New Negro and racial uplift ideologies put forth by Du Bois, he does so at the expense of Dianthe.

Dianthe, on the other hand, is a vulnerable black woman preyed upon by the medical field, and this becomes further explored in terms of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century with issues of reproductive oppression, sexual violence and sterilization abuse in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*. I analyze the mind control, transplantation, experimentation, and literal enslavement of black bodies both physically and psychologically as well in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. Although I agree Hopkins's novel addresses many issues regarding racist science and experimentation, I argue Reuel is complicit in performing some of these same violent and exploitive acts with his speculative technology. On the other hand, Hopkins does deliver an interesting take on speculative fiction and an early work of Afrofuturism that sets the stage for the works of Butler and Peele. There is also a stronger move toward a critical dystopia in these later works since Reuel does not attempt to change Western society's perceptions once he realizes how amazing his utopian African past in Telassar is. Instead, he decides to leave his family (Dianthe and Aubrey) to die, while he reaps the benefits of the utopian world of Telassar. Although he finds acceptance as a black man in this world through his connected royal lineage, the future is uncertain. In the final scene of the novel, Reuel reflects on his new life and responsibilities as King Ergamenes: "He views, too, with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land" (Hopkins 193).

Despite Telassar's advanced society and strength in African culture, Reuel is still fearful of the threat of the West. This moment exemplifies the deeply ingrained racist ideologies he has suffered and that will haunt him forever. He is a product of the generational trauma black people have suffered for centuries, and even if he has escaped to this utopian place, he allows his

experiences to continue to define him. Thus, this example of speculative fiction expresses the flaws of a utopian world when there are still dystopian and oppressive forces that impact marginalized people. Without change and a critical dystopia, even the most utopian of places (like Telassar) are at risk of being overtaken. Even though *Of One Blood* ends uncertainly, it does encourage black people to seek out their past and find value in African knowledge production and culture. Racist science and experimentation on black people and black bodies persist throughout time, though, and as a result, black authors in the later 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century must take on these histories of violence to imagine better worlds and futures. Before I begin my analysis on those works, I will first discuss the exploitation, dehumanization, and disillusionment of the utopian American dream for Mexican immigrants used as cheap laborers; and the emerging industrial technologies of the railroad and cinema that produce virtual realities in Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, another work I reclassify as speculative fiction in my next chapter.



## Chapter 2: The American Dream as Utopia, Dystopia, and Virtual Reality in Daniel Venegas's *The Adventures of Don Chipote*

“Nos trabajan como esclavos  
y nos tratan como perros.  
No más falta que nos monten  
y que nos pongan el freno.

Si alguno lo toma a mal  
es que no lo ha conocido.  
Que se vaya a contratar  
a los Estados Unidos.

Y verá que va a trabajar  
como un esclavo vendido.  
Antes éramos honrados  
Y de eso nada ha quedado.

Con eso del pasaporte  
nos creemos americanos  
Pero tenemos el nombre  
de ser desarraigados.

Allí les va la despedida  
a toditos mis paisanos  
Si quieren tener honor  
no vayan al otro lado  
A mantener contratistas  
y los troqueros hambrientos.”  
-*Corrido de los desarraigados*<sup>47</sup>

In 2018, the Oscar-winning Mexican director Alejandro G. Iñárritu brought the immersive virtual reality exhibit *CARNE y ARENA (Virtually present, Physically invisible)* to cities across the country. This six-and-a-half-minute virtual installation is meant to be experienced alone so that you can fully immerse yourself in the video sequence. When you enter the space, you are virtually transported to a desert, with actual sand beneath your bare feet as you

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<sup>47</sup> A corrido about the horrific treatment and conditions of Mexican immigrants in the US from María Herrera-Sobek's *Northward Bound: The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song* (164-65).

walk toward the border at night with a group of travelers. Specifically, this exhibit shares the real-life narratives of immigrants and refugees that told their stories for this project through interviews with Iñárritu and are reenacted in this video sequence. I participated in this virtual reality exhibit in Washington D.C. When I first arrived, I was told to store all my items in a locker, including my shoes. Then, I sat in a simulated “refrigerator room” where immigrants and refugees go when they are first detained. The room is freezing cold and you sit bare-foot for about 10 minutes until an alarm goes off. Shoes, backpacks, and pieces of clothing are scattered everywhere in this room. These items are the actual belongings left behind by immigrants and refugees in the desert and these refrigerator rooms. Once you enter the room, you are given a backpack that weighs about 20 pounds, and a virtual reality headset to hear and see the vast room before you. It is extremely disorienting at first, especially because your journey begins at night and it is hard to see. As you follow your fellow travelers across the desert and learn a little about them, bright lights blind you and that is when you are discovered by the border patrol. The video sequence concludes with a traumatic scene where a gun is pointed at you by an officer and you are told to get on your knees or get shot – and then everything turns dark and it is over.

I begin with this brief discussion of Iñárritu’s virtual reality installation and my experience going through it because it resonates with my analysis in this chapter on Daniel Venegas’s *The Adventures of Don Chipote, or, When Parrots Breastfeed* (1928), and the symbol of American Dream as a utopia and dystopia for Mexican immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also argue that this novel should be reclassified as an early work of speculative fiction because the narrative uses elements of science fiction and fantasy to highlight the dystopian realities experienced by Mexican immigrants in the 1920-1930s who were being exposed to emerging

industrial technologies like railroads and cinema for the first time, and as a result, get immersed in a kind of “virtual reality” of achieving the American Dream.

But what is the American Dream? Who has the right to pursue this dream? What beliefs do Mexican immigrants have when they enter the US with high hopes? The American Dream is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative” (“American Dream,” Dec. C2). Simply by definition, Mexican immigrants are excluded since this American Dream is an ideal for every *citizen* of the United States. There is no mention of non-citizens such as immigrants. This definition’s etymology, dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and was used frequently during the 1930s to promote nationalism and pride among US citizens. This phrase seems to diminish in 1931, perhaps in response to the Great Depression, when prosperity, abundance and faith in the American Dream reached a new low.

In this chapter, I argue *The Adventures of Don Chipote* illustrates the entanglements of utopia and dystopia within the American Dream. On one hand, the American Dream symbolizes a utopia of prosperity and success for poor Mexican immigrants in pursuit of a better life. On the other hand, dominant US government institutions that wield more power envision an exclusionary utopian dream – ultimately creating the dystopian realities for Mexican immigrants through cheap labor and exploitation. I explore how the protagonist, Don Chipote, attempts to navigate and overcome his dystopian realities in Mexico by first crossing the border, and then later on in the US, using emerging technologies like the railroad and cinema to escape and immerse himself in a virtual reality where he believes he has achieved the utopian promises of

the American Dream. This temporary escape proves ineffective, however, and reduces his identity into a purely transactional one.

My definition of a transactional identity is that the value of one's life is determined by his or her worth based on the labor he or she can provide or the amount he or she consumes when buying material things. This is something I build on in my chapter on the film, *Sleep Dealer*, to think about how a transactional identity manifests in an entirely virtual world where a person's value becomes based on points, coins, ranking and other signifiers that equate to the illusion of having monetary wealth or elevated social status, when the reality is you are objectifying and sacrificing your physical body and vital affective energies in exchange.

Historically, Mexican immigrants have been perceived as unwanted visitors who also wanted to pursue the American Dream but were imagined as representing economic unpredictability because they could either serve as a surplus labor force to strengthen the economy, or such as in the Great Depression, thieves stealing the jobs of US citizens. This strained identity has situated Mexican immigrants in a vulnerable and inferior status regarding citizenship and has even affected generations that have come after and were born in the US (Chicanx) but were questioned on the validity of their citizenship. As a result, stringent immigration policies were implemented to remove Mexican immigrants immediately (whether it was after temporary work, or to secure jobs for citizens) and continues even today with the Central American humanitarian crisis at our borders.

Our history has consistently proven that a utopian vision is more attainable for those in power when vulnerable populations, particularly Mexican immigrants and marginalized communities, can be easily exploited. What we are left with is a disillusioned version of the American Dream, and the dystopian realities are what Mexican immigrants are left to survive in.

There is still a desire for change and for something better, however, or as science fiction calls it: a utopian impulse. As Jameson points out in *Archaeologies of the Future*, interrogating aspects of the utopian program and its commitment to closure (in this case, oppression and exploitation), allows the possibility for imaginary enclaves to emerge in real social spaces, and reveal the true dystopian realities that exist, or serve as subtexts for the transformative critical dystopias that emerge in *Sleep Dealer* and *Lunar Braceros* 2125-2148.

First, I am going to provide the historical and sociological context for this novel. *The Adventures of Don Chipote* was written about Mexican immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an era of rising industrialism, technology, and virtual reality (through cinema), which is why I suggest that this is an early work of speculative fiction based upon the satirical, fantastical, and science fictional aspects of the narrative.<sup>48</sup> Venegas tells the story of a Mexican immigrant in pursuit of the American dream and the challenges that he faces, such as difficulties crossing the border, and then the discrimination and exploitation he endures when in the US. This novel represents a time when the concept of the American Dream was especially alluring due to false utopian promises of freedom and wealth, especially for poor rural Mexican farmers like Don Chipote. More important, Venegas includes his own voice in the narrative to provide more critical perspectives about the political climate surrounding immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some of which he himself experienced and wrote about as a journalist for the Spanish-language Los Angeles newspaper *El heraldo de México*.

Even though this story can be read as satire or historical fiction on the surface, I argue that this is an early work of Latinx speculative fiction because it focuses on the Mexican immigrant experience as fantasy and science fiction in relation to the US industrial revolution.

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<sup>48</sup> As a Mexican immigrant narrative with elements of a *corrido* and satire intertwined, this text also exemplifies the unlimited possibilities of speculative fiction.

Industrial technologies in the form of transportation, such as cars and railroads, appeared science fictional and even magical (or possessed by a devil) to Mexican immigrants who had never encountered them before. Don Chipote also engages in what I believe is an early form of virtual reality, the cinema, to escape; as well as an alternate reality he creates through his dreams to reminisce about his Mexican homeland. His full-fledged virtual reality comes to life when he begins to truly believe he is a US citizen, with a new girlfriend and a stable job; but this is soon interrupted by the reality that he never belonged in the first place, and he is deported back to his farm in Mexico.

But first, how did the American Dream become a symbol of utopia, especially for economic prosperity, for Mexican immigrants in the first place? Mexicans were subject to the political turmoil and reign of Porfirio Diaz during the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920, and as a result, perceived the US as an escape from their country's corruption and were often presented the opportunities to do so. The US has always had interests in Mexico, especially in terms of investments and labor, particularly when they gained almost half of Mexico's territory in 1848. For the US, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) supported the utopian vision of expanding the frontier and empire, even if that meant the displacement of Mexican and indigenous native populations in the Southwest.<sup>49</sup> This treaty was a catalyst that led to subsequent decades of political unrest and war in Mexico. David G. Gutiérrez explains in *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* that this treaty offered few options for Mexicans, such as: "removing" themselves and going south of the newly created border, retaining their Mexican citizenship in the US but now being identified as a "permanent alien," or choosing to become a US citizen (17).

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<sup>49</sup> My use of the term "American" is in the ideological sense. In this example, American frontier and empire is about Manifest Destiny and expansionism in the US.

Although this generated mass migrations from Mexicans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced the greatest influx of Mexican immigrants into the US. In Douglas Monroy's *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression*, he explains, "The greatest wave of migration north occurred in the 1920s, that decade followed the destruction and dislocation of the Revolution. It was a time when Mexico urgently needed its most able-bodied people to rebuild the war-torn nation" (19). The early twentieth century was an extremely tumultuous time for Mexico, and Porfirio Diaz's privileging of wealthier classes over poor farm workers led to the implementation of land policies that removed most small farmers from the land. Diaz helped the US-Mexico's capitalist and globalized relationship to blossom, primarily by fueling US capitalist desires for cheap labor and resources. George Sánchez states in *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* that Porfirio Diaz "unintentionally made Mexico an economic appendage of the United States. By 1911, the United States received more of Mexico's trade than all European nations combined, and between one-fourth and two-fifths of all American foreign investments went to Mexico" (22). Moreover, in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico lost 10% of its entire population due to the mass migrations (Monroy 94). Thus, this history reaffirms the US as a utopian space of economic prosperity, primarily for the US, but nonetheless provided the illusion to Mexican immigrants that this is where the American Dream could be attained, and Mexicans could escape the hardships in their homeland.

It is important to note, however, that Mexican immigrants soon learned the truth and myth of the American Dream and as a result, generated a rich amount of literature in the form of *corridos*, narrative songs that revealed the real struggles migrant laborers experienced crossing

the border and living in the United States.<sup>50</sup> *Corridos* contributed to the shifting perceptions that Mexican immigrants had about the American Dream and alluded to the true state of dystopia they lived in and experienced in the US.

Even though the material conditions and social realities of both Mexico and the US serve as a dystopian space for Mexican immigrants like Don Chipote, the science fictional tool of virtual reality becomes a method for powerful institutions like the government or corporations to manipulate one's mind and possess what I call a transactional identity. My definition of "transactional" is comprised of the straightforward definition of buying and selling. I build upon this concept; however, by exploring how a transactional identity is made when one performs labor or certain acts in exchange for validation or value of his or her life in virtual reality worlds.<sup>51</sup> In other words, a transaction or act of buying and selling is not simply done for products, goods and objects; although, many times individuals are simply reduced to objects of consumption and exchange it for a certain social status or monetary gain. Rather than people being recognized for their self-worth or value as a human being, he or she is thrust into some sort of virtual reality that causes him or her to be quantified into something else, typically points or rankings. Virtual reality plays a role as the in-between, and even the middle-man between the individual and that object or service that he or she is seeking by entering this other world. Although commodities mostly have stayed consistent over time, consumerism and the consumer himself or herself have completely changed.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> A *corrido* is a type of narrative song that could be read as poetry or sung. A couple of examples are: "The Immigrants" ("Los Enganchados" – "The Hooked Ones") and "The Railroad."

<sup>51</sup> Although I do focus primarily on a "transactional" identity through virtual/alternate realities and technologies, I do recognize the concept of "transactional sex," which is also an exchange of sex for money, goods or services. While this is certainly an important aspect, I only apply this definition in one scene of *Sleep Dealer* when Luz uses her body and sex to gain information from Memo.

<sup>52</sup> An example of how our worth and values are exchanged in the real world is by what we sacrifice when we open up a virtual profile such as Facebook. Unknowingly, we enter into a digital social contract with Facebook and allow data to be collected based on our activity on the web. Despite this explicit invasion of privacy, people cannot see the



My concept of virtual reality is defined by Matjaž Mihelj, Domen Novak and Samo Beguš in *Virtual Reality Technology and Applications* as, “composed of an interactive computer simulation, which senses the user’s state and operation and replaces or augments sensory feedback information to one or more senses in a way that the user gets a sense of being immersed in the simulation (virtual environment)” (1). Virtual reality allows for an immersive experience because of the *sensory* components that rely on touch, vision, and hearing. I argue *The Adventures of Don Chipote* utilizes a version of virtual reality through the early technologies of moving pictures, cinema, and transportation. My analysis suggests that cinema and moving pictures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are examples of speculative fiction and science fiction because subjects immerse themselves into completely new worlds, and arguably a virtual environment. According to the *National Science and Media Museum*, cinematography is defined as “the illusion of movement by the recording and subsequent rapid project of many still photographic pictures on a screen.” Cinema is like virtual reality because it manipulates objects or our environment through a virtual lens and operates as a type of “illusion.” The word “illusion” is important because it embodies the concept of virtual reality, and represents the false utopian promises in the ideology of the American Dream. Moreover, I argue that the fantasies and dreams that Don Chipote invokes represent an alternate reality that he transports himself to so that he can relive his memories and romanticize his past life in Mexico. My analysis in this chapter will take you along the journey of a Mexican immigrant, Don Chipote, and his struggles crossing a place of enclosure (the border), his disillusionment with the utopian American Dream

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visible “transaction” they are having with this social media network. In exchange for a profile where we can display a virtual version of ourselves, we actively give up a part of our identity that is used for companies to think of more ways to sell us items or services. Often, simply liking an article or searching on our web browser about something may result in an ad on Facebook of that same thing – constantly reminding us of what we *need* or manipulating us into thinking it is what we need. As a result, this allows for a type of power over us as consumers and reveals how we too are complicit in the formulation of a transactional identity.

when he arrives, and finally, his struggle to survive in a dystopian place that seeks to objectify, abuse and exploit him.

In *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, the utopian promises of the American Dream are illustrated by the hearsay from a returning compatriot named Pitacio, who convinces Don Chipote that the US is a land paved with gold that can bring a poor rural farmer like him economic prosperity and happiness. For Don Chipote, the American Dream represents the escape from days of toiling on his farm and trying to make ends meet for his family. Mexico is characterized as a kind of dystopia, whether one is in the rural territory, or in the border-towns, such as Ciudad Juarez. The narrator illustrates Ciudad Juarez as a place “where caravans of *braceros* go to emigrate from their fatherland in search of work, obligated by the disgrace of Mexico,” which directly alludes to the historical and social conditions after the Mexican Revolution, a time when thousands of Mexicans left in hopes of escaping the political, economic, and social instability (Venegas 33). The narrator also defines this border-town as the crossroads where Mexicans must decide to stay loyal to their own country or make the journey to the US to improve their financial situation and future:

...where so many proletarians have found protection against persecution of the Mexico's ruling party – in the company of other countrymen expatriated in the shame of not being able to make a living in their own land – who, lured by the luster of the dollar, abandoned their own land to come to suffer even greater hardship. (Venegas 43)

This passage exemplifies the stark class divisions between the rich and the poor, especially for farmers like Don Chipote. This observation also suggests that because of these inequities, Mexicans must choose to migrate to survive. As a result, some of the existing dystopian elements of Mexico's crumbling society are what displaces many of the poorest populations to the margins, eventually driving them out of the country, away from their cultural and national roots.

Ultimately, Don Chipote's choice to cross to the US exposes the utopian American Dream for what it truly is for a non-citizen: a myth.<sup>53</sup> Don Chipote is enchanted by the myth of the American Dream and the dishonest stories that Pitacio feeds him so that he can lure him away from his country and into the US. When Don Chipote finally arrives in the US, however, he gradually loses his faith in the utopian fantasy of the American Dream and learns of its true character as a dystopia possibly far worse than the Mexican one he was living in.<sup>54</sup>

Even though Mexico displaced and segregated parts of its population as I mentioned earlier with the rich Mexican elites and the poor Mexican farmers; the US takes it a step further in their utopian program by closing its borders to anyone deemed "undesirable," and only gives a temporary pass to those wanting to cross if they can prove their value as laborers. Before an immigrant even enters the US, he or she experiences a dystopian environment where he or she is subject to humiliation and inspection at the border. Jameson explains that the Utopian program has a commitment to closure (totality), and as a result, this totality and closure of a system becomes the source of "otherness" or "alien" difference (4-5).<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the Utopian space is an "imaginary enclave within real social space," because of spatial and social differentiation (Jameson 15). In other words, the utopian dream for the US is primarily achieved by creating

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<sup>53</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a myth is defined in a number of ways, but the most applicable is the mythical allure of the American Dream as: "A widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth" ("Myth," Def. 2a).

<sup>54</sup> Don Chipote experiences these dystopian characteristics primarily when crossing into the US and his employment with the railroad. When he is in Los Angeles, however, he finds a job as a dishwasher, and he begins to enjoy the American life. This is short-lived though when his wife comes from Mexico and they make such a spectacle that they are arrested and deported back to Mexico since they are exposed as illegal immigrants.

<sup>55</sup> Jameson's concept of the Utopian program is important in my connection to how neoliberalism has progressed and evolved in future society. In fact, David Harvey explains in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* that neoliberalism can also be defined as a, "utopian project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of an international capitalism or as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (19). This is especially important in my analysis in the final part about *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* and *Sleep Dealer's* globalized societies and transnational markets that ultimately exploit poor socioeconomic communities for labor to maintain power. Harvey states, "While neoliberalization may have been about the restoration of class power, it has not necessarily meant the restoration of economic power to the same people" (31).

closed systems and totality, and as a result, it segregates social classes from one another, and in this example differentiates US citizens from non-US citizen migrant laborers. Jameson adds that the misery caused by enclosure serves as a source of collective suffering, which can arguably evolve into a critical dystopia, but does not happen in this novel (13).

When Don Chipote is humiliated at the border, this illustrates the US's utopian and eugenic vision to reject any "undesirables" from entering. Don Chipote experiences these dystopian moments at the border when he is asked to strip down and shower: "After taking off his clothes, he was naked as a jaybird, putting his grubby little paws in a box of powdered disinfectant, then hitting the showers," although Don Chipote enjoys the shower because he believes cleansing himself will be his ticket into the US (Venegas 35). This is far from the truth, as historians Francisco E. Balderama and Raymond Rodriguez explain in *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* because men, women and children waited long hours at the border just to be seen and could still be turned away. They were also detained for hours without drinking fountains or bathrooms and were forced to shower in public bathrooms and have their clothing disinfected (11). Gutierrez explains that the rationale behind this treatment was regarding public health concerns because, "immigrants were blamed for spreading contagious diseases throughout the land" (56). The discrimination that Mexican immigrants faced at the border went beyond just a concern for public health, but also involved the inability to communicate and assimilate effectively because they possessed a foreign cultural background and language.

Border patrol officers exacerbated Mexican immigrants' ability to cross by alienating them because of language barriers. There were many misunderstandings, and as a result, there was much ridicule and abuse from the US officials. For example, Don Chipote is told that he is

required to pay a fee, but he cannot understand because he only speaks Spanish, and when an interpreter informs him of the fee that he cannot pay, he is immediately turned away. This becomes one of the first indications that the US's utopian program cannot be attained without financial wealth and literacy, making those non-citizens without it, even more unlikely to pursue those opportunities, let alone be allowed into the country. After all this humiliation and rejection, Don Chipote reflects, "He could not explain why they had treated him this way – he who had never hurt a soul, who had never had a run-in with the law...he could not figure out why things had turned out the way they did" (Venegas 39). He does not understand that he was abused and treated this way because of his non-citizen status, and he does not analyze the situation critically either. Thus, despite this scene's dystopian elements, they do not generate a critical dystopia because Don Chipote persists in his mission to enter the US but must seek out an alternative illegal route to cross successfully.

George Sánchez explains, "As movement across the boundary increases, both sides have a vested interest in 'creating' and 'recreating' the border to suit the new social and economic realities of the region" (39). On one hand, Don Chipote "recreates" the border by transcending those invisible boundaries and crossing illegally to begin his pursuit of the utopian American Dream of wealth and prosperity. On the other hand, the US then creates even stricter border policies through militarized and xenophobic practices that become more extreme in *Sleep Dealer*. As we can see, the abuse of Mexican immigrants, especially those entering the US illegally, can be traced as far back as the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Even though Venegas's story was written in 1928, it forecasts the even more dystopian state for Mexican immigrants during the 1930s. Historically, when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, Mexican immigrants became the scapegoat for the lack of employment opportunities.

Camille Guerin-Gonzales in *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* explains that major deportations were initiated beginning in 1931 and the Bureau of Immigration was tasked with finding and deporting all undocumented immigrants in the US (79). During this time, racial prejudice increased against Mexicans (both immigrant and US born), and these two groups were “repatriated” back to Mexico, even some who were Mexican American citizens. In fact, more than 365,000 Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans were deported between 1929 and 1932 (Guerin-Gonzales 94). Although thousands of Mexican immigrants were deported back to Mexico, US capitalism has consistently accepted them (both aware and unaware of their legal status) as convenient and cheap laborers.

Don Chipote’s illegal entrance into the US puts him in one of the most vulnerable positions to be in: he is temporary, exploitable, and expendable, especially when he begins working on the railroad track (*el traque*). At this point, the narrator offers a critique of how undocumented immigrants are abused by US capitalists, “...knowing that Mexican *braceros* can be useful in all types of work...shipping out greenhorns to the *traque* or to the cotton fields, where the workers are usually treated like animals. Those slave drivers, who make their living from Mexican disgrace, appear to be our guardian angels when we come across them” (Venegas 53).<sup>56</sup> In this statement, the narrator offers a space and voice to these dispossessed and denied subjects, gesturing to a type of critical dystopia. First, he emphasizes that these Mexican

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<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in Curtis Marez’s *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance* (2016) he explores the backbreaking labor by farm workers, through the symbolic representation of the short-handed hoe (especially in photographic representations). Marez states that, “The tool helped make the worker’s labor visible to the bosses, reproducing an unequal set of visual relationships whereby big growers were the subjects, or we might say ‘owners,’ of the gaze, while farm workers were its objects. The inequality of these relations of looking were furthered by the way the short-handed hoe required workers to repeatedly reproduce a posture— bent over, with bowed head and often on bended knee—symbolically linked to gendered and raced qualities of abjection such as subservience, weakness, or primitiveness, and implicitly contrasted with the superior-class qualities of independence, power, and advanced civilization conventionally coded as white and male” (87).

immigrants were dispossessed from their land and forced to migrate to the US; and second, that they were denied the equal opportunity that the utopian American Dream is supposed to symbolize. This critique challenges US capitalist ideology that Mexican *braceros* are biologically suited to perform hard labor, even comparing their treatment to that of animals. Employers even stereotyped and perceived Mexicans as, “docile, patient, usually orderly in camp, fairly intelligent under competent supervision, obedient and cheap” (Gutierrez 46). Despite this discrimination, the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century relied heavily on Mexican labor to do the “dirty work” that needed to be done but was perceived as unacceptable for an Anglo to do, and serving as the rationale for allowing Mexican laborers into the US (Gutierrez 46). Mexicans were “birds of passage,” that would never become permanent citizens of the US; they were simply seasonal guest workers (Gutierrez 45).

In this excerpt, the narrator pities these poor Mexicans as victims of a national economic disgrace, which as a result, makes it easy for Mexican citizens to be taken advantage of in the US. The narrator debunks the utopian promises that US employers give to these poor immigrants who are only seeking jobs to improve their livelihoods. In fact, in many cases they will never transcend their economic struggles because racial capitalism fundamentally depends upon such hierarchies and actively produces rather than eliminates them.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the narrator comments on one of the author’s personal experiences on the topic of abuse and erasure in the following way: “I talked back to him. He socked me. And I returned his lick. I got canned, losing even the time I had already worked. Incidents like these happen daily on the *traque*, and not few

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<sup>57</sup> My understanding of racial capitalism emerges from Cedric Robinson’s definition from *Black Marxism: The Making of The Black Radical Tradition* (1983). Racial capitalism is defined as a modern world system that is dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism and genocide (xiii). In connection to Harvey’s exploration of neoliberalism, he makes a similar statement about freedom and racial capitalism, “the only way this liberal utopian vision could be sustained is by force, violence, and authoritarianism” (37).

are the foremen who have gone as far as killing Mexicans, such crimes going unpunished” (Venegas 71). This statement illustrates that Mexican immigrants face even greater risks if they enter the US illegally because if they get into a confrontation, they will be fired, have their wages taken, and could even be killed. Unfortunately, if they are killed in the US, they experience complete erasure because since they do not have the documentation to prove their existence in the US, they technically do not exist in the eyes of the nation-state. Thus, the dystopian elements of being in the US are intensified because of the unpunished crimes that happen against Mexicans working in the US. Furthermore, laborers working on the railroad are provided with accommodations through the “Supply” store, but this is at the price of endless debt and labor.

The Supply represents the entangled utopian promises of the American Dream and the dystopian elements of US capitalism that manipulates consumers into taking on insurmountable debt to survive. In this novel, the Supply is the utopian promise that Don Chipote and other immigrants desire: stability. The Supply is supposedly a resource that provides Mexican immigrants the convenience of ordering basic items that they need to survive and inhabit a type of subsidized housing. Unfortunately, this twisted and dystopian system is a strategy to pay the laborers less than their fair share. Whatever they purchase from the Supply becomes garnished from their wages and they become stuck in a cycle of debt that is difficult to escape. The narrator contextualizes this aspect of the novel by discussing autobiographical information from Venegas, almost like an oral history, stating, “In this whole time that this writer had to work on the *traque*, he doesn’t remember ever having received a paycheck consistent with the amount of time worked...because the infamous Supply spends whatever it feels like and charges whatever it wants” (Venegas 19). This explanation suggests that the Supply, although a convenient company store, is a monstrous capitalist institution that terrorizes those who have no choice but to use it.



This capitalist system places Mexican immigrant laborers in a situation that they are forced to comply with if they want to survive. Those who work on this railroad track find it almost impossible to escape once they begin accumulating debt. Additionally, as the narrator indicates, there is no accountability from the Supply, because it capitalizes on these poor laborers by leading them to believe that they will be supported with food, supplies, and shelter; when in fact, the debt they accrue in this warped system prevents them from ever leaving. The only way that Don Chipote can escape from this corrupt cycle is when he accidentally buries a pick-ax into his foot. This injury leaves him in such bad condition that he can no longer work, and consequently, prevents him from pursuing the utopian American Dream since his body is his only “value” to the employers, and now that he cannot perform the labor, he is useless. As a result, he enters a dystopian state where he finds himself badly injured and in the eyes of the US, unemployable, and also vulnerable to the manipulations of virtual and alternate realities.

Although virtual and alternate realities might seem like a perfect escape on the surface, they are often a tangible example of disillusionment. By entering a new world that offers an alternative to a dystopian reality, it is most likely too good to be true. Like the disillusioned American Dream, virtual realities also come at a cost, a transaction and social contract that one does not truly grasp until it is too late. Even in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century novel like *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, the rules of virtual reality still apply. Historically, the concepts and technologies surrounding virtual reality can be traced as far back as the 1800s with the stereoscope, and in the late 1930s to the View Master.<sup>58</sup> Even though virtual reality has been traditionally found in

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<sup>58</sup> I recognize that the stereoscope is not the first virtual reality technology created and there were other devices that pre-date it. I chose the stereoscope as an example because it is one of the most well-known. Recently, Virtual Reality has become the cutting-edge technology in the 21st century with devices such as the Oculus Rift. Oculus Rift is a virtual reality system that immerses the user into virtual worlds. It was developed through a division in Facebook in 2016.

stories such as Philip K. Dick “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale” or films like *The Matrix*, I argue that Mexican immigrants coming into the US were living in a version of virtual reality and sometimes alternate reality (through dreams) even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with emerging technologies such as cars, trains, and the cinema.

Don Chipote creates a type of virtual and alternate reality for himself through technological innovations emerging in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his dreams. At first, he fears these new technologies, especially those associated with transportation, because he believes they are possessed by an evil magic or presence. When Don Chipote is first exposed to these “electric car lines” or trains, he identifies them as being “possessed by evil spirits” (Venegas 44). His distrust of technology is based upon his religious ideologies, that are now being shaken by modern US industrialism, technology and science. Don Chipote eventually overcomes this fear when he is forced to work on *el traque*, yet he still finds himself dreaming of the past, especially the wife and children he left behind in Mexico, and these dreams and fantasies are what make up his alternate reality. In one scene the narrator explains, “He returned to reality and continued to prepare for his debut on the *traque*, or the ‘little gold mine’” (Venegas 67). Since Don Chipote must “return to reality,” his dreaming signifies a type of alternate reality he has created to remember his past life in Mexico, and to cope with the dystopian reality he now experiences in the US as a cheap migrant laborer. I argue that his dreams and visions of the past represent an alternate reality because originally, Don Chipote felt he was living in a dystopian reality in Mexico as a poor farmer, and now that he has distanced himself from it, he has romanticized it in this way to recall it with fondness and nostalgia. The use of the word “debut” also reveals a type of performance where Don Chipote will engage with this technology he fears (*el traque*) in exchange for the transactional identity he will gain from working on it (in this case, money).

Unfortunately, the longer Don Chipote stays in the US, his Mexican identity begins to dissolve and his desire to return becomes less urgent when he believes he can possess the American Dream as he gains more “stability”: a good job, a home, friends, and a flapper girlfriend. As a result, the American Dream becomes a type of virtual reality for Don Chipote and disillusion him even further from reality as a temporary Mexican immigrant laborer, and this assimilationist attitude threatens to completely sever his ties to his homeland in Mexico and erase the alternate reality that represents his cultural identity and past.<sup>59</sup> Don Chipote undergoes a transformation that metaphorically divides his Mexican identity from his blossoming American one, through a violent fusion with the industrial technologies he is working with on the railroad, that ultimately disrupt his life and loosens his grip on the true dystopian reality he is living in.

In one the most gruesome scenes of the novel, Don Chipote drives an ax into his foot while working on *el traque*, and this metaphorically begins the severing of this part of his Mexican identity, in place of the American one he desires and that he tries to convince himself he possesses. Just before this incident occurs, Don Chipote is in a state of drowsiness and “sleep spells,” which suggest his consistent shift between the reality he created (his past in Mexico as a romanticized dream) and the present virtual reality he finds himself in on *el traque*. Don Chipote’s focus is elsewhere and his break from the dreaminess happens when, “...he raised the pick-ax over his head as high as he could. And he struck at the rail with such bad aim, that, instead of hitting the beam, the pick-ax buried itself into his foot. The wound he gave himself woke him up even more” (Venegas 83).

In this moment there are two significant changes in Don Chipote. The first is that the tool he is using to build this new industrial technology (the railroad) is now what he digs into his own

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<sup>59</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, assimilationist is defined as, “One who advocates the integration of different races, cultural groups, etc.” (“Assimilationist,” Def. 1a).

flesh and skin. As a result, the traditional definition of virtual reality as a computerized technology that grants one access into a virtual space through a headset or other equipment, seems to be happening in a similar way. There is a similar type of connection happening within Don Chipote as his sensory and bodily experiences fuses with this “low-tech” railroad. But during this time, the railroad was considered a modern invention to help with efficient transportation.<sup>60</sup> As a result of this horrific injury, Don Chipote transforms himself by fusing with this technology and this causes a break in his Mexican identity and puts him in a full-fledged virtual reality where he is living the American Dream.

At first, Don Chipote and his friend Policarpo express anxiety and distrust toward modernization and industrialism in the US, especially through technologies involving transportation because they have never encountered anything like it in Mexico. For example, when Don Chipote and Policarpo board the “Iron Horse” (train) to seek medical attention for his foot at the Santa Fe Hospital, they are exposed to even more technologies and industrialized cities as they move further away from the US-Mexico borderlands where most of the labor is (railroads or farmland). While the train was completely alien to them, an automobile like a truck is even more threatening and causes them to be, “transported to another world, and nearly fainted – because this was the first time they had ridden in a carriage that moved without oxen to pull it” (Venegas 92). This example is representative of the cognitive estrangement and sensory sensations that illustrates Don Chipote’s full immersion into a virtual environment and reality. Don Chipote and Policarpo feel disconnected from the real world as they are transported into this virtual one where, “With everything that was happening to them, they thought they had to be dreaming” (Venegas 93). Their grip on reality is loosened by their exposure to new technologies,

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<sup>60</sup> This idea of intermingling “low-tech” and “high-tech” technologies also highlights elements of cyberpunk science fiction literature.

and they find themselves in this virtual environment that may or may not be one of their imagining. After Don Chipote's direct fusion with the railroad technology, he shifts into this virtual reality in the US, while also trying to hold onto an alternate reality through his dreams of Mexico, which later materializes into the performances at the cinema.

When Don Chipote's foot heals and he returns to work, he also starts buying into the US's industrialism and consumerism because he believes that anything can be bought if one is willing to pay, and this contributes to his transactional identity to use his labor in exchange for what he can buy. While walking around the city the narrator observes, "The more they saw, the more they liked the things, which seems so inexpensive that they wanted to buy them, not just for themselves but for their families, as soon as they found a job" (Venegas 107). This illustrates Don Chipote's shifting attitude as a Mexican immigrant, and as more of a US American consumer that believes he can *buy* these items that will bring *value* to him and his family. By possessing these material items, he thinks it will elevate his status and this is his primary motivator to work. Like his experience at the Supply, he is once again manipulated into a capitalist cycle that requires his cheap labor to buy into this aspect of the American Dream that is being sold to him, in this case, wealth and status through materialism. Don Chipote becomes so obsessed with what he can buy (even believing he can buy love) that he sacrifices everything in hopes that he can be completely assimilated into this virtual reality and achieve the utopian promises of the American dream. But this urge to assimilate and take on a completely US American identity gets destabilized when he goes to the cinema and is immersed in a new virtual reality where his Mexican past is shown to him through cinematic moving pictures and performances.

When Don Chipote first enters a movie theater, like the emerging transportation technologies that scare him, he is frightened when he is enveloped in complete darkness, but this eventually grants him a new immersive virtual reality experience where he takes on a more active role in shaping the reality he desires: one of both Mexican and US American identity. In this case, Don Chipote's distrust of technology is caused by the moving pictures, for "It wasn't until Don Chipote realized that the fellows who appeared on the big screen were moving on their own that he began to get nervous, or more clearly stated, he started to get scared" (Venegas 114). Eventually though, Don Chipote recognizes himself in the films and especially with the theater performances by Mexican singers, and actors, but instead of his dreams, now he can pay to access memories from his past. With the cinema and performances, the alternate reality that Don Chipote originally created by his romanticized dreams of his past in Mexico, now become tangible in this virtual reality environment. At this point then, Don Chipote begins to think he can have it all his: his new American identity and his past Mexican one. Unfortunately, this marks a pivotal moment when Don Chipote learns that the American Dream was never his to begin with, it was all a dream, a product of the virtual reality he created.

The cinema and the performances transform Don Chipote's life because in this virtual reality he can participate and play the role of whomever and whatever he wants to be, thus, giving him the illusion of having the power he has lacked since entering into the US, in this case the rights to the American Dream which he has not been fully granted since he is undocumented. With this newfound agency, this virtual reality allows him to shift his identity as a cheap laborer to a performer who sings his own songs and recites poetry. But his performances extend beyond the cinema because when Don Chipote leaves this space, he starts believing that he is living the American Dream and formulates an entirely new identity for himself that disconnects him further

from what he left behind in Mexico. For example, Don Chipote performs for his flapper girlfriend who “took her leave” of him, but only because of what he can buy for her, and who he uses almost all his money on (Venegas 149). Nonetheless, Don Chipote is too immersed in the virtual reality of the American Dream that he believes he now possesses: “So then, more in love now than ever before, he went to his room to dream about all the pleasures that he would enjoy with his flapper. And because of this, he forgot all about his Chipote family and even started to think of himself as an eligible bachelor” (Venegas 150). This excerpt conveys Don Chipote’s shift into this new world he believes he has created for himself, and how he rejects his Mexican identity and past, particularly his own family.

While many of the emerging technologies originally provoked fear in him, they all eventually led him to enter some sort of virtual reality, one where he assimilates more into an American lifestyle and forgets about his past. This excerpt also alludes to the disillusionment of Don Chipote’s desires because he is still portrayed as only really dreaming about his life with the flapper, and not necessarily the reality of how she is using him. This indicates the blurring between what is real and what is not, and he continues to lose his grip on reality the longer he stays and buys into the American Dream. In fact, the concept of assimilation has led many Mexican immigrants entering the US to believe that living in this more industrialized or technologically advanced country will allow oneself to also adopt a new US American identity, but this is only if they are willing to reject one’s previous cultural ties. Don Chipote is faced with the reality of his status as an undocumented Mexican immigrant when his wife and children from Mexico show up at one of his performances.

When Don Chipote’s wife Doña Chipota confronts him during one of his performances, they are discovered by the authorities and deported back to Mexico, thus ending his US

American life. While being held in jail, Don Chipote's dreams emerge once again. As he is drifting to sleep, he dreams of his life with the flapper girlfriend and then suddenly, "his dream changed, and he saw his happiness cut short by the presence of a witch, who, envious of his love, changed him into a mule with one slap" (Venegas 154). This moment illustrates a moment of desperation where Don Chipote attempts to enter back into his happy US American virtual reality through his dreams, but the truth prevents him from doing so. Even in his dreams, the reality has set in and the dystopian world he has always been living in becomes more visible. He was never the eligible bachelor he thought, but rather a mule (ass) that adopted a transactional identity where he exchanged his Mexican identity, marriage and family, in favor of the US American one he made, a life and identity that never belonged to him in the first place as an undocumented immigrant. The reality of the US, specifically its immigration laws, are what thrusts Don Chipote out of this virtual reality and back to the hardships he was facing in Mexico. When Don Chipote and his family are deported back to Mexico, he returns to his Mexican identity and reality. Moreover, the epilogue begins the same as the prologue, suggesting a déjà vu and even dream-like sequence that Don Chipote has endured for the entirety of the novel. This is important to note, especially as a work of speculative fiction, because the narrative suggests that we never truly knew what was real or imagined. It leaves us wondering: what reality or realities was Don Chipote ever truly a part of in the first place?

Don Chipote's reality is difficult to understand when he shifts between the real world and his dreams because he blurs those lines for himself and the reader. When he dreams again at the end of the novel, the truth about his reality is painfully clear:

And in his dreams he saw bitter adventures, in which he played the protagonist, unwind like a movie reel, sweetened by the remembrance of his flapper's love. It was a memory that would not allow him to forget the trouble that Chicanos



experience when leaving their fatherland, made starry-eyed by the yarns spun by those who go to the United States, as they say, to strike it rich. (Venegas 160)

This scene suggests that only in Don Chipote's dreams is his American Dream now accessible, just as it was before when he dreamt of his past in Mexico. When he dreams, he is transported to the world he desires most, but is haunted by the memory (or reality) of his status as a Mexican immigrant. Additionally, he refers to himself as an actor and protagonist in the story, once again trying to situate himself with a US American identity to live out what is left of the US American life he created in his dream. He refers to his memories to express the harsh lessons he has gained about the US: the utopian American Dream is not a reality for Mexican immigrants.

Don Chipote's statement also illustrates the literal fabrication of this false dream by the "yarns spun," and the disillusionment of what truly awaits immigrants in the US. Rather than achieving economic wealth and status, their "starry-eyed" hopes and dreams never go anywhere, they are consistently in a state of dystopia. Like Don Chipote, Mexican immigrants may be lucky enough to get a taste of US American life, but only through assimilating into a virtual reality version of US American life and adopting a transactional identity that rejects their Mexican one. Unfortunately, as history has shown us and from Don Chipote's experiences, many Mexican immigrants are sent back to the reality they belong to, one in which they only have their memories to remind them of what could have been. Even then, memories can be unreliable since they are entangled with the dreams of the world they were once part of. Thus, the American Dream represents a twisted virtual reality that Mexican immigrants may or may not enter, but in the end, they learn that they are never truly welcome in this country. Despite all these experiences, Don Chipote is given no choice but to accept his dystopian realities as a poor Mexican farmer unable to enact true change and a critical dystopia in the US.

In *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, this narrative represents many of the injustices against

Mexican immigrants during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, it is done in a satirical and humorous way to lighten the dystopian nature of the truth. For example, Don Chipote is often confused when he is abused or treated unfairly, and any true social commentary comes from the narrator to reflect upon actual events that had happened to the author Daniel Venegas. The only time Don Chipote seems to express any sort of criticism is at the end when he warns against going to the US in pursuit of the American Dream because “Mexicans will make it big in the United States...WHEN PARROTS BREAST-FEED,” which suggests they will never be successful and reaffirms the idea that the American Dream is only a myth for Mexican immigrants (Venegas 160). Don Chipote’s story illustrates the dystopian realities facing Mexican immigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both the US and Mexico and speaks to historical events such as the Great Depression when xenophobia increased, and mass deportations occurred.

Don Chipote’s warning at the end of the novel, however, signifies a small gesture toward a critical dystopia. He expresses the truth to other Mexican immigrants like himself about going to the US in pursuit of the American Dream. He hopes that his story and this warning will reveal the truth about the dystopia that awaits them, and to just stay and suffer in Mexico. Unfortunately, Don Chipote does not offer much more of a critique than that, and therefore, cannot be considered moving toward a transformative critical dystopia. He does not try to implement change or develop a collective struggle. Instead, he ends the novel in the same place where he started, lonely and unhappy in his Mexican dystopia. Even though *The Adventures of Don Chipote* does not deliver a strong critical dystopia, it does pave the way as an early form of Latinx speculative fiction for the science fiction texts that I explore later, like *Sleep Dealer* and *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*, that deal with issues of immigration, labor, virtual reality, settler colonialism, and more in these futuristic societies.

I began this first part of my analysis with *Of One Blood* and *The Adventures of Don Chipote* to demonstrate that these texts are early works of speculative fiction because they extrapolate on the present realities and experiences of people of color and immigrants of color in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and are revisited in later works of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Part two of *Reclaiming the Future* will build on my analysis for *Of One Blood*, by exploring issues of racist science and the exploitation of black bodies and black lives that evolves into the reproductive oppression and sterilization abuse of women of color in the 1970s illustrated in Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* and the criminalization and mass incarceration of black people in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.

## Part II: Speculative Fictions From the 1970s to Now

### Chapter 3: Alternative Histories and Futures of Reproductive Justice in Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed*

“Why do I write? Because I can’t expect others to tell my stories, or even to understand that I have more than one story to be told.” – Octavia E. Butler (OEB 146)

Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) is a speculative fiction novel that navigates the life of an immortal shape-shifting African Igbo woman named Anyanwu, and the enslavement she endures at the hands of an immortal disembodied spirit and African Nigerian man named Doro, who kills others by hijacking their bodies and uses them as hosts. Doro convinces Anyanwu to participate in his eugenic breeding project to identify as many other super-beings as possible and breed them to create the “perfect” utopian civilization of an immortal race of people. Although Anyanwu is powerless to Doro at times, there are moments where she uses her powers to protect herself and resist his reproductive control and sexual oppression over her. In this chapter, I argue that Butler's *Wild Seed* interrogates reproductive control (such as abortion rights and sterilization abuse) specific to women of color in the US during the 1970s through the figure of Anyanwu. Butler's novel also extrapolates from the US politics surrounding the 1976 Bicentennial celebration and the emerging ideologies of multiculturalism through the figure of Doro. *Wild Seed* demonstrates Butler's focus on how people of color (especially women) were navigating and surviving their dystopian realities of sterilization abuse, reproductive control, and manipulative multiculturalism from the Bicentennial during the 1970s and archiving those overlooked histories. At the same time, she was also reimagining different futures with hopes for reproductive justice, some aspects of a critical dystopia, and alternative forms of reproduction and technologies that would make the world a better place for people of color to live in. *Wild Seed* also explores some of the dystopian realities of the 1970s by juxtaposing and connecting

them to earlier historical flashpoints from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to illuminate the deeply rooted histories of sexual violence and reproductive oppression of black women during the transatlantic slave trade and before emancipation. I analyze how Butler's *Wild Seed* also reimagines US eugenic policies implemented during the 1970s, such as laws that affected thousands of poor women of color who were forcibly sterilized because this was the only way their welfare benefits would fund an abortion and give them access to birth control.<sup>61</sup> My analysis also suggests that US policies during this time were rooted in eugenics ideologies (which flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) that promoted family-planning initiatives that sought to decrease reproduction by women of color and eliminate the potential for non-heteronormative same-sex and interracial relationships.<sup>62</sup> I draw from Butler's own personal records and histories from The Butler Papers at the Huntington Library to illustrate how she practiced speculative fiction to historicize and criticize her present, but also theorize about the future for people of color, and especially reproductive justice for poor women of color.

Butler's novel also criticizes the emerging concept of multiculturalism by extrapolating from the rhetoric of the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations that promoted inclusivity and diversity but did not accurately represent the stories of people of color, unless it was to showcase successful examples of assimilation and homogenize them into the US's larger "melting pot." Although Butler's character Anyanwu challenges some aspects of reproductive control, heteronormative relationships, and eugenics – a critical dystopia is not entirely reached because she does not destroy Doro, who represents systems of oppression and power over reproduction,

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<sup>61</sup> The specific policies I will be referring to in my analysis are: *Roe v. Wade* (1973), *Doe v. Bolton* (1973), *Relf v. Weinberger* (1973), and the Hyde Amendment (1977). I will discuss this further in my section on my key concepts and theoretical framework.

<sup>62</sup> I understand heteronormative according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "Of, designating, or based on a world view which regards gender roles as fixed to biological sex and heterosexuality as the normal and preferred sexual orientation" ("Heteronormative," Def. 1).

but instead, rejoins him in the end. Butler's formulation of Doro is complicated, however, because as a black man that manipulates multiculturalism to recruit people into his "colonies," this suggests a different strategy than the government or corporate institutions exerting power by promoting multiculturalism. Butler's choice to situate Doro as a black man may allude to black liberation leaders that similarly tried to control the reproduction of black women and reverse the racial genocide enacted by forced sterilizations. While there is no definitive answer to why Butler created a black character like Doro to represent the manipulation of multiculturalism language, it does convey her overarching arguments about power. Butler's criticism of power illustrates her complex fascination with it and fear of it, and this may be why she raises questions about the emerging ideologies of multiculturalism that look ahead to how it might be used in the future by black liberation leaders in power. Nonetheless, I argue that Butler's primary concern with issues of power emerge from reproductive control and justice for poor women of color during the 1970s.

Working with the archives from the Butler Papers at the Huntington Library has generated the direct criticism and reflections I found from Butler, and conveys how she bridges the dialogue between her past and present world and the future she imagines in *Wild Seed*, and more important, how she practices speculative fiction as a historian and futurist, or HistoFuturist. My understanding of HistoFuturist comes from Shelley Streeby's article, "Radical Reproduction: Octavia E. Butler's HistoFuturist Archiving as Speculative Theory," where she explains Butler's creation of the term "HistoFuturism" as a "an alternative to and a merging of the work of historians and Futurists" (721). I use this concept of HistoFuturism to build on my analysis of the Butler Papers, to demonstrate how Butler produced speculative fiction and practiced world making to reimagine and criticize the world around her, while also generating alternative

possibilities for reproduction (like surrogacy), non-heteronormative and interracial families, genetic engineering, and the science and technology of transplantations. My goal in this chapter is to consider Butler's extrapolations from her lived experiences of the 1970s using some of this archival research (such as her common books, manuscripts and research notecards) and illustrate how she centered issues of people of color in her novel, especially women of color, who were facing issues of reproductive control, sexual oppression, and eugenics.

Since *Wild Seed* goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars have focused on the novel's biblical allusions, the transatlantic slave trade, and Anyanwu and Doro's genderqueer identities.<sup>63</sup> I argue that *Wild Seed* does not simply focus on the patriarchal domination over women's bodies and reproduction, but that there are larger influences of institutional and political racism and sexism toward women of color that fueled policies to force sterilizations and halt reproduction of women of color entirely. Moreover, I argue that despite the reproductive control that Doro *does* have over Anyanwu for most of the novel, there are moments when she illustrates autonomy over her body through her abilities to perform her own abortions or genetically engineer her biology and that of her children the way she wants.

For my analysis on Anyanwu's body, I build on Patricia Melzer's analysis in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* of Anyanwu and Doro's "unstable bodies," but argue that Anyanwu's shape shifting does more than disrupt traditional gender binaries; she also uses it to illustrate the possibility for non-heteronormative, same-sex relationships, which

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<sup>63</sup> A couple of scholars I am referring to are Ingrid Thaler's chapter in *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions*, which explores Butler's biblical allusions and the presence of slavery as a tool of patriarchal domination over women's reproduction. I am also referring to Sarah Wood's complex reading of the novel's use of Judeo-Christian tradition to reinforce and legitimize sexism and racism (1-2). While I agree with Thaler and Wood's arguments that there are dogmatic ideologies stemming from the bible that promote sexism and racism, my analysis departs from this by drawing from eugenic US-policies for abortion and sterilization abuses in the 1970s.

challenged the eugenic family-planning rhetoric prevalent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>64</sup> I also explore the interracial coupling that happens in *Wild Seed* to demonstrate how Butler undermines eugenics ideas that same-sex and interracial relationships diminish US family values and a strong blood line. I demonstrate how Butler problematizes and criticizes the emerging ideas of multiculturalism (that promoted diversity and inclusivity) in the 1976 Bicentennial through the representation of Doro's seemingly inclusive breeding project that encourages same-sex, interracial and even incestual relationships. My analysis also uses Butler's common books and research notecards to explore how she uses speculative fiction as a practice of research and journal writing to reimagine different futures and reflect on current issues. I draw from her lived experiences of witnessing the US policies that were impacting women of color and their reproductive rights in the 1970s, as well as the broader discourses of diversity and inclusivity emerging during the 1976 Bicentennial that also affected how women of color were represented in feminist groups and, eventually, evolved into the term multiculturalism in the 1980s.

In *Wild Seed*, Butler implements her HistoFuturist technique of bridging history with the future by using her research and journal writing to practice speculative fiction in a way that facilitates world making and revisions of the past, present and future. Butler's research notecards show her commitment to historical accuracy in her novels and the world making of alternative technologies and scientific practices, especially with reproduction. Her journal writing, on the other hand, conveys her critiques of her present realities and express her feelings about poor women of color struggling to get abortions and the policies that prevented them from gaining access to safe and affordable reproductive health care. Streeby illustrates Butler's archiving as a

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<sup>64</sup> Patricia Melzer also states that Anyanwu and Doro possess "stable sexual identities through unstable bodies" that still subscribe to binary gender identities of female or man, despite having a "transgender quality" or "genderless body" that allows them to become either one (224, 227, 229).



new form of knowledge production that generates “counter-historical narratives and forms of radical speculation that provide alternatives to dominant histories and ways of knowing” (722). I build on Streeby’s analysis of Butler’s archiving as speculative theory and new forms of knowledge production to assert how *Wild Seed* draws from Butler’s personal research notecards and journals to produce speculative theory about new forms of reproduction (like surrogacy), genetic engineering, and scientific transplantation methods. Additionally, I show how Butler’s journal writing is in dialogue with other feminist and activist women of color discussing reproductive rights during that time, such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Mary Treadwell and the Combahee River Collective. I refer to other black feminist and American Studies scholars such as Dorothy Roberts, Anne M. Valk, Loretta Ross, and Rickie Solinger to analyze the impact of eugenics, reproductive control, and sterilization abuse on women of color in the 1970s. I also use Alexandra Minna Stern’s *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding* to reaffirm the conversations that women of color were having about abortions, forced sterilizations, and the autonomy over their bodies, lives and futures in this period.

Even though *Roe v. Wade* (1973) seemed like a progressive US policy because it legalized abortion, this was more to the benefit of upper and middle class white women and often exclusionary to poor women of color who had difficulty accessing affordable birth control (like abortions) and were subjected to sterilization abuse if they did want it. Despite the strength of the feminist movement during this time, bell hooks explains in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, that the “particular circumstances of black people” were not taken into consideration by white feminists because they did not see the intersectionalities of racism and sexism, which hurt women of color in their struggle for reproductive control and freedom because white feminists did not recognize that many poor women of color suffered from

sterilization abuse if they sought out abortions (97, 100, 107). The Combahee River Collective expressed their desire for abortion rights and reproductive justice in “A Black Feminist Statement” by emphasizing the varying degrees of oppressions black women face: “We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women” when it comes to “sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care” (215, 217). While black women and many poor women of color did want abortion rights, they risked giving up their reproductive rights altogether because of sterilization abuse. In Dorothy Roberts’s *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, she discusses how reproductive politics were truly “racial politics” and treated black reproduction as a form of “degeneracy,” and this racist attitude is what caused many poor women of color to be sterilized in the first place (9). It was almost impossible for poor women of color to access the proper reproductive health care for abortions. Poor women of color faced limited options for getting an abortion; they could either risk their lives doing it illegally (and often almost died in the process), or consent to sterilization. In Anne M. Valk’s book *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington D.C.*, she explains that women on Medicaid or other welfare programs were urged by family-planning initiatives to consent to sterilization if they wanted to get a safe abortion (88). These family-planning initiatives were a part of a larger eugenic agenda that targeted many women of color who Stern explains “clamored for greater reproductive control” (224). Instead, they were perceived as “destructive overbreeders whose procreative tendencies needed to be managed” (Stern 224). Stern refers to cases like *Madrigal v. Quilligan* (1978) in which “working-class Mexican-origin women who had been coerced into postpartum tubal ligations minutes or hours after delivering via cesarean section” were subjected to forced sterilizations implemented

because of eugenics rhetoric and proper family-planning initiatives that upheld so-called true American values (223).<sup>65</sup> These are several examples of how the struggles for reproductive control and freedom affected women of color, and the “racial politics” that were disregarded in mainstream, white-dominated versions of the feminist movement.

Access to safe abortions became even more problematized for women of color with the enactment of the Hyde Amendment (1977), which halted federal funding for abortions, except if it was to save a woman’s life or because of a pregnancy from incest or rape. At this point, it was now nearly impossible for many women of color on public assistance to even have the option to get an abortion despite its legality. I refer to scholars that explore the histories of eugenics and women of color feminism in my analysis to illustrate how Anyanwu navigates similar issues as an African woman subject to the sexual abuses of Doro that resonate with the larger institutional abuses on women of color in the 1970s by dominant power structures like the government and hospitals. I argue that Butler’s novel and the extrapolations of her present realities, particularly these harrowing policies of reproductive control over women of color, register the need for *reproductive justice*, a key term I will discuss in the next section.

My understanding of reproductive justice emerges from Loretta Ross’s and Rickie Solinger’s *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. Ross and Solinger explains that reproductive justice is not the reductive debates surrounding pro-choice/pro-life, but rather, is a combination of three principles: “(1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and health environments” (9). Ross and Solinger assert that reproductive justice is about human rights and that “These laws and policies deny people their right to control their bodies, interfere with their reproductive decision making, and, ultimately,

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<sup>65</sup> I will also be referring to Stern’s work to illustrate how eugenic family-planning rhetoric was used to discourage same-sex and interracial coupling.

prevent many people from being able to live with dignity in safe and healthy communities” (10). In reference to the Combahee River Collective’s earlier statement, this definition of reproductive justice highlights the varying degrees of support that women of color would need to gain the autonomy they desire over their bodies and be provided the necessary resources when deciding whether to have children. Moreover the “welfare laws punished the pregnancy and childbearing” of those same women seeking abortions, and this fact reaffirms that poor women of color endured the most injustices and inaccessibility when it came to reproductive control and freedom (Ross and Solinger 15). Women of color were also denied knowledge regarding their reproductive rights since legislators did not want to “fund quality education and training for children of women without access to abortions” (Valk 105).

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu uses her shape-shifting abilities to apply the first two principles of reproductive justice (whether or not to have children) but struggles with the final principle under Doro’s rule. When she finally escapes Doro and I argue, begins moving toward a critical dystopia by starting her own new world and reality, she truly achieves all three principles that encompass reproductive justice. This is also possible because Anyanwu is committed to fostering new forms of knowledge-production through what she learns from her children and teaching them her own practices. I argue Anyanwu represents a “living archive” that collects new information about her body and alternatives for reproduction that is influenced by Butler’s own research on science and technology. Anyanwu illustrates the autonomy over one’s body and the *knowledge* about it that was denied women of color during the 1970s.

Another critique Butler makes in *Wild Seed* is about the 1976 Bicentennial and emerging ideologies of multiculturalism. The planning committee for the 1976 Bicentennial faced many difficulties in a post-Civil Rights era where many citizens distrusted the government to honestly

represent US American values after years of racism, violence and oppression toward people of color. Natasha Zaretsky's book *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline 1968-1980*, explores this flashpoint in history and its façade of inclusivity and equality. Although the idea was to decentralize this celebration and encourage people to take part in the US melting pot imaginary, the revisionist histories created about people of color signified an inability to acknowledge these contentious histories and an effort to shed a positive light on the nation instead. For example, Zaretsky explains that a Smithsonian exhibit on immigrant homes failed to highlight the immigrant's culture or traditions, and instead, made the mass-produced items of the household the focal point to convey that American products, consumption and assimilation were more important (164). Moreover, Tammy S. Gordon explains in *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (2013), that the term "buycentennial celebration" also emerged to advocate for US capitalism and consumerism because "Consumerism was *inclusive*, just like social history; it was something in which almost everyone could participate" (9). In *Wild Seed*, Doro's eugenic agenda is not initially identified by those he recruits into his colonies because he promotes inclusivity and embraces them for their *differences*, but only on his terms. Like the 1976 Bicentennial celebration that Butler witnessed, the character Doro adopts multiculturalism rhetoric to manipulate and persuade more super beings like himself to join his seemingly diverse family.

Even though the term multiculturalism does not officially emerge until the 1980s, I argue this concept was already manifesting itself at this point in time and exposing some of the contradictory aspects of the Bicentennial celebrations that promoted inclusive and diverse participation. In Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield's *Mapping Multiculturalism*, they explain that the term multiculturalism, "alternately encouraged and suppressed the use of cultural

difference to expand political democracy” and was never truly about inclusivity as the 1976 Bicentennial led people to believe (5). As a result, the concept of liberal multiculturalism emerged as a response from dominant institutions to the insurgent demands for racial justice. My understanding of this concept also builds on the work of Jodi Melamed, who argues that “official antiracism have made inequalities appear fair, and they have represented people exploited for or cut off from distributions of wealth and institutional power as outsiders to antiracist liberal subjectivity – or multicultural subjectivity – for whom life can be disallowed, even to the point of death” (13-14). In other words, multiculturalism appears fair because it promotes inclusivity, but ignores the factors that prevent people of color from accessing equal opportunities because of race, class, economics and more. I suggest Doro implements the ideologies of liberal multiculturalism to collect people into his colonies and expand his experimentations and breeding on super beings like himself. Since Doro is an African man, he promotes inclusivity differently because it is not about race, but rather, it is about one’s special abilities and powers. Doro manipulates multiculturalism in a way that privileges certain powerful beings over others, yet still causes inequities among the people on his colonies.

I believe that the speculative theorizing and world making that Butler does in *Wild Seed* suggests possibilities for reproductive justice through Anyanwu’s special shape-shifting abilities, while also acknowledging the intersectionalities of race, class and gender that influenced the US policies surrounding eugenics and family-planning initiatives that sought to control reproduction, same-sex and interracial relationships of women of color in the 1970’s. Moreover, Butler anticipates the emergence of multiculturalism ideology through the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations to undermine the seemingly inclusive message to people of color in the US through Doro’s portrayal as the accepting father of all children into his family. Doro, however, does not

perceive his children as human beings at all, to him they are all just part of his larger experiment to build immortal and superior race of beings. Although I argue Anyanwu moves toward a critical dystopia when she creates her own colony, it is not completely fulfilled when she is found by Doro and willingly returns to him. For the purpose of this analysis however, I will provide the glimpses of hope that appears in *Wild Seed* using the archival research and journal entries from Butler's papers, as well as the history, keywords and theory that come together to help us analyze the dystopian realities Butler experienced in the 1970s and alternative paths for people of color in the future. I will begin my analysis of *Wild Seed* by exploring how Butler addresses eugenic practices for better breeding, sterilization abuse, family-planning initiatives and multiculturalism as tools of power and manipulation to fulfill Doro's utopian and eugenic vision of building a society of immortal super beings like himself.

In *Wild Seed*, Doro's goal to breed super immortal beings like himself follow eugenic practices that generated racist ideologies about better breeding and promoted the sterilization of people of color perceived as degenerates throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, eugenic ideologies either encouraged reproduction from those believed to have desirable genetics and traits for "better breeding"; or, eugenic rhetoric discouraged people (primarily poor women of color) from reproducing because they were believed to be part of a "degenerate" group that should not have children (or too many children). The eugenics movement during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century promoted "improving the race of a nation by increasing the reproduction of the best stock," and sometimes even encouraged intermarriage (Roberts 60). During the mid to end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, eugenics became more about halting reproduction to "prevent socially undesirable people from procreating," and created social programs that promoted "compulsory sterilization as a means of stemming social degeneracy" and targeted many poor people of color

that relied on state institutional support (Roberts 65, 66). Butler suggests that Doro bred his super human beings “for exactly the same reason people bred rabbits” (Butler 114). As a disembodied spirit, Doro’s humanity is questionable and in cases like this one, his detachment from other human beings suggests that producing the perfect immortal offspring is more important than treating them like his family. Referring to them as animals, or rabbits, reinforces his dehumanizing attitudes about simply finding as many people as he can to fulfill his eugenic vision.

Doro reproduces some of these eugenic practices through his experimentation with the people he brings to his colonies:

Doro had been their god since he had assembled them generations before and commanded them to marry only each other and the strangers he brought to them. They had obeyed him, throwing away clearly defective children born of their inbreeding, and strengthening the gifts that made them so valuable to him. (Butler 49)

In this scene, Butler conveys her fascination with and fear of power by illustrating the hubris of Doro’s position as a God-like figure. Butler is most concerned with Doro’s possession of power and how his leadership is used to abuse and exploit those people he brings to his colonies (even if they are black people like him). This excerpt also resonates with the eugenic practices of better breeding that encouraged intermarriages or outside relationships with those considered desirable breeders. On the other hand, Doro eliminates the defective or degenerate children so that only his best breeders and children remain. Doro believes that by disposing of the children with weaker genetics, he can strengthen his bloodline and eventually create the immortal super being he desires most. Doro focuses on the physical appearances of his children as an indication of whether their life is worth keeping. As a result, Doro commits racial genocide against his own people by killing them if they are defective, in lieu of sterilizing them. It is not until he meets



Anyanwu that she challenges these eugenic practices by adopting reproductive justice principles and exercising the autonomy she has over her body to abort or genetically engineer her children. In the 1970s, “Black women fell victim to widespread sterilization abuse at the hands of government-paid doctors” and Doro’s own practices resonate with this eugenic history that targeted people of color to create a utopian vision of the US through better breeding or sterilization (Roberts 87, 89). In this case, Butler aligns Doro with these powerful institutions as a powerful God-like figure that determines who lives and dies, and who should be encouraged to reproduce and who should not.

Doro also differentiates his offspring based upon physical defects, and judges the psychological defects they may have if their powers are not useful to him; and this echoes eugenic family-planning initiatives and social programs used to identify if a woman was fit to have a family, or if someone should be sterilized to prevent passing on “feeble-mindedness” to his or her children. During the 1930-1970s, the American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR) implemented the Johnson Temperament Test (JTA) as a family-planning survey given to women to check if they had any “negative” traits such as aggressiveness or criticalness, which threatened manhood and “helped popularize biotypological understandings of human difference” (Stern 195, 198). Even though the AIFR used the JTA primarily on middle-class families, other social programs like IQ tests were used to show the “feeble-mindedness” of people of color, when any shortfalls in testing were typically due to the lack of bilingual education available. For example, many Mexican Americans were given this IQ test and identified as “mentally handicapped,” which fueled the eugenic movement’s aim to justify more sterilizations because they were stereotyped as “volatile mestizos” (Stern 213, 214).

Many of Doro's offspring are powerful beings that he uses for various purposes (such as telekinesis, mind control, strength, etc.). Despite their great powers, however, they fear him because he has the ultimate power to end them by killing them and using their bodies as hosts for his spirit. He explains how he implements his own type of temperament and personality tests on his offspring to Anyanwu: "'I control powerful people,' he said. 'My people. The destruction they can cause if they disobey me is beyond your imagining. Any one of them, any group of them who refuse to obey is useless to me and dangerous to the rest of my people'" (Butler 85). This statement represents the JTA test results women would receive because similarly, if Doro's offspring carry certain negative traits, in this case disobedience, he kills them to maintain control over his people and instill fear in them about his power. Doro treats disobedience as a type of mental handicap comparable to the physical defects he sees in his offspring and will kill them either at birth or later in life if they show him this type of behavior. In a later section, I discuss how Anyanwu seeks to heal others and reverse these cruel eugenic practices, even with temperamental or defective people, and this is something she finally gets to do when she creates her own colony toward the end of the novel. This part of the novel illustrates how Anyanwu's world making and vision of the future (compared to Doro's) truly invites inclusivity and the nurturing and love of a family. But first, I will provide a final reading of Doro's eugenic agenda and how Butler imagines him using multiculturalism rhetoric to manipulate vulnerable super beings to be a part of his colony and subject themselves to a life of slavery and reproductive control under his rule. Butler may have written Doro as using the emerging rhetoric of multiculturalism as a form of power that was useful to government and corporate institutions, but also as her own speculation on how patriarchal power even in liberation movements could also adopt this seemingly inclusive language, or how mainstream feminist groups were using it for

universal reproductive freedom, yet overlooking the socioeconomic factors poor women of color faced when it came to abortion rights and reproductive control.

Doro manipulates people into believing in his utopian eugenic plans by using the false promises of inclusivity and diversity found in the emergent term of multiculturalism, which reflects the marketing language used in the 1976 Bicentennial that created the kind of “anti-racisms” ideologies that were further solidified in the 1980s and 1990s. The aim with the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations was to invite historically marginalized groups to tell their stories and give them the space to “claim a concrete identity, whether that of one’s own family, race, ethnicity, or tribe (as opposed to the broader history of the nation), was crucial to the resurgence of nationalism anticipated by the Bicentennial” (Zaretsky 155). Despite the Bicentennial planners’ intentions, people of color in the US felt their identities were inaccurately represented or simply ignored because many of the commemorative activities elided US histories of racial violence and oppression by focusing on the *assimilated* immigrant story. Zaretsky explains that, “Emerging throughout the Bicentennial as a repository of both ethnic survival and loss, the immigrant home endorsed the white revivalist vision of the ethnic family and thus became implicated in the hostile relations between African Americans and white ethnic groups in the mid-1970s” (164). As a result, the ethnic identities that were being recognized and celebrated were not those of people of color who had been living in the US for centuries, but newly arrived and assimilated immigrants. The 1976 Bicentennial’s façade of inclusivity for all cultures and people thus became one of the foundations for the emergent term multiculturalism.

Melamed identifies multiculturalism as a part of the larger “state-recognized antiracism” framework that the US implemented to reinforce “liberal modes of instating normative and rationalizing power” (2). Moreover, this state-recognized antiracism also “naturalizes the

privileges of those who benefit from present socioeconomic arraignments and makes the dispossessions of those cut off from wealth and institutional power appear fair” (Melamed 2). For example, those women who benefited from reproductive rights and US policies like *Roe v. Wade*, appeared fair to all women at first, but did not consider the lack of wealth and power experienced by poor women of color.

I will return to reproductive rights and reproductive justice in my next sections, but first, I want to emphasize my main point about Doro’s use of multiculturalism rhetoric that Butler criticizes in connection to the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations promoting diversity and inclusivity. Doro appeals to these other super beings because he tells Anyanwu, “Their differences have made them outcasts. They are glad to follow me” (Butler 19). This statement conveys the alienation and marginalization that Doro’s people feel even before he meets them, making them vulnerable to his invitation for stability, happiness, and more important, family. Like the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations that intended to help people claim a concrete identity, Doro provides a similar offer to these people to follow him so that they will no longer be rejected by society for their differences and abilities. By following him, he gives them the option to change the trajectory of their lives and future by being part of a multicultural family that will accept them for who they are. When they agree to be a part of his family, however, Doro’s underlying intentions to use multiculturalism to normalize and rationalize his power is revealed, because he treats all his children as potential breeders and possible kills if they do not give him what he wants or disobey him.

Ironically though, Doro’s methods do stray from some of the racist eugenic ideology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by allowing interracial coupling among his people.<sup>66</sup> In one scene, Doro’s son

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<sup>66</sup> Stern explains that another aspect of eugenic practices was forbidding interracial relationships, which did not get overturned until 1967 with the *Loving v. Virginia* case (177).

Isaac criticizes Doro for convincing people to follow him and be a part of his multicultural family: “He dumps all the people he can’t find places for in his pure families on us. Mix and stir. No one can afford to worry about what anyone else looks like. They don’t know who Doro might mate them with - or what their children might look like” (Butler 111).<sup>67</sup> Isaac’s statement conveys that even though Doro *does* promote the inclusivity aspect of multiculturalism by accepting various ethnicities, it is simply for his breeding experimentations that sometimes lead to death for those he deems defective or no longer useful to him. Moreover, Isaac refers to Doro’s privileging of “pure” families that he has properly bred the way he would like (arguably like the “assimilated” immigrants), and his segregation of those who do not fall into that category – they exist, but do not fit in with his vision of the future society of people he hopes to create.

The image of mixing and stirring also connects with the 1976 Bicentennial’s advocacy to invite all types of people to share their stories as part of the US nation’s melting pot of diverse ethnicities and cultures. Even though Doro overlooks race by allowing interracial coupling to go on, he does exert prejudice by making distinctions among those he perceives as “pure” bred and those who are not. Isaac concludes his observation by underscoring the dystopian life they truly live when they choose to follow Doro. Even if someone was worried about interracial breeding, they do not have the power to deny Doro what he wants, and Anyanwu soon learns that she too was manipulated by Doro’s false promises and as a result, she suffers the worst of his sexual abuse, oppression, and control over her reproduction.

Anyanwu’s experiences with Doro in the New World are comprised of domination and enslavement because he sexually exploits her and controls her reproduction by forcing her to breed with him and whoever else he wants; and this suggests Butler’s reimagining of feminist

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<sup>67</sup> Isaac is one of Doro’s favorite children and he explains that he had, “controlled the breeding of Isaac’s ancestors for millennia” and that Isaac was his “true success” (Butler 69).

women of color struggling for reproductive rights and justice in the 1970's.<sup>68</sup> Doro's cruel methods point to a critique Butler is making about the government and healthcare institutions that implemented birth control measures that sought to control the reproduction of women of color by sterilizing them so that they could never procreate again. Women's access to birth control and safe abortions seemed like a victory for mainstream feminist groups, especially after *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* legitimized it. For women of color, however, these supposed "victories" in reproductive rights and birth control were embedded with racist and eugenic ideologies that provided abortions in exchange for sterilization. Moreover, many women of color on public assistance fared the worst with doctors who enforced sterilization quotas to decrease the likelihood of mothers going on welfare in the future.<sup>69</sup> Feminist activists such as Angela Davis described this as a "racist form of mass 'birth control'" and that true freedom and justice for *all* women could not be achieved until the end of sterilization abuse (354). Other activists such as Mary Treadwell demanded structural change from lawmakers to "fund quality education and training for the children of women without access to abortions" if they were going to refuse them the right to have one done (Valk 105).

Butler engages with these conversations in one of her journal entries where she openly advocates for equal access to abortions for poor women of color, writing that "[President Carter] believes that poor women on medicaid should not be as able as their richer sisters to get abortions" (OEB 178). The dystopian realities of reproductive rights politics in the 1970s are

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<sup>68</sup> Doro takes Anyanwu away from her African village to the US (referred to as the New World in the novel).

<sup>69</sup> Stern states that the primary medical care for poor people and women of color, such as Medicaid, "encouraged sterilization and "authorized to reimburse up to 90 percent for a sterilization procedure" (224). Roberts also explains that "During the 1970s sterilization became the most rapidly growing form of birth control in the United States, rising from 200,000 cases in 1970 to over 700,000 in 1980" and some doctors even required sterilization after a mother's third baby to "reduce the welfare rolls" (91, 92). For even more context, "During Hitler's Germany, incidentally, 250,000 sterilizations were carried out under the Nazis' Hereditary Health Law" (Davis 218). This was explicit genocide in the case of Native American women, specifically from the Kaw tribe, who were all sterilized and as a result, "At the end of the generation the tribe will cease to exist" (Roberts 95).

evident in Butler's representation of Doro and his own reproductive control over Anyanwu.

Doro's plan for Anyanwu was always to get "as many children as he could get from her before it became necessary to kill her. Wild seed always had to be destroyed eventually" (Butler 98). This statement illustrates Doro's plans to control Anyanwu's body and reproduction because of the powerful genes she can pass on to her offspring. After he has sexually exploited her "as one bred cattle and goats," he plans to kill her because even though he values her "seed" he perceives it as disobedient and "wild" (Butler 133). Because Anyanwu is a "wild seed" Doro does not trust her to make her own decisions about reproduction and the future of her children.

This resonates with the justification for sterilizing so many women of color and poor women in the 1970s because in doing so, the state and healthcare institutions would decrease the "wild seed" from "over-reproducing" and "save the state money, impede irresponsible parents from having more children, and boost the well-being of society" (Stern 226).<sup>70</sup> Doro believes that the well-being of his society will be the benefit of Anyanwu's offspring and then eventually her death, so that he can continue to use her body as he pleases and halt any rebelliousness from her. He threatens Anyanwu frequently into submission by saying "Must I take your body and get the children I want from it myself?" and emphasizes his power over her body, reproduction and life (Butler 133).

Similarly, many women of color and poor women in the 1970s felt hopeless when seeking abortions because government institutions that provided them public assistance support were threatened with the loss of coverage if they did not consent to sterilization. The infamous *Relf v. Weinberger* (1973) case illustrated the extreme measures the government took in trying to control the reproduction of women of color by sterilizing them as the only option for birth

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<sup>70</sup> In 1973, there was even a bill proposed in Mississippi called HB 180 that tried to punish women who had a second illegitimate child to face five years of prison or get reproductive surgery as their sentence (Stern 226).

control or threaten to take away their welfare benefits.<sup>71</sup> Further investigation found that “an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 poor women like the Relf teenagers had been sterilized annually under federally funded programs” and consented because eliminating their benefits was a matter of life and death for those who depended on it to support their family (Roberts 93). With this history and Butler’s own personal journal entries about it, Butler’s critiques and interpretations of these issues emerges in *Wild Seed* through Doro’s power over Anyanwu in controlling her reproduction, the future of her children, and the threat on her own life; and these all resonated with many of the poor women of color facing the same injustices in the 1970’s. Then with the Hyde Amendment in 1977, the hope for poor women of color ever gaining reproductive freedom, control, and justice seemed even more dystopian; but Butler chose to reimagine it differently through Anyanwu’s abilities to shape-shift her internal reproductive organs, and give her back the power over her body and reproduction, and more important, invoke the possibility of *reproductive justice*.

Anyanwu possesses the special abilities to “look inside herself and control or alter what she saw there” and reshape her internal organs to become any man, woman, or even animal she desires, and more important, Butler theorizes the future for women of color and reproductive justice by giving Anyanwu abilities to formulate her own birth control methods (Butler 58).<sup>72</sup> Butler wrote Anyanwu as a black woman capable of making her own decisions about whether to have children because she was deeply affected by US policies like the Hyde Amendment that made birth control almost impossible for poor women of color to access and consequently, made

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<sup>71</sup> This case refers to the Relf sisters (14 and 12 years old) who were sterilized because their mother (who was illiterate) consented to the procedure and was threatened with losing their welfare benefits if they did not have the procedure done (Davis 362).

<sup>72</sup> Anyanwu’s abilities make her almost like a microbiologist, geneticist and immunologist all in one because her abilities allow her to see, “Living things too small to see. I have no name for them, but I can feel them and know them when I take them into my body. As soon I know them, I can kill them within myself” (Butler 31).



them choose risking their lives with an illegal and cheap abortion. In one of Butler's journal entries, she criticizes the Hyde Amendment's "exceptions" (abortions only for rape, incest, etc.) and the primary issue of a woman's lack of control over her body and life. Butler writes in a journal entry:

the "old values," the old male values, especially are violated, some man's rights are violated when a woman is taken by force by some man who has no 'right' to have sex with her. If the feelings of the woman herself were the main consideration, rape incest, and threat to life would be the only "acceptable" reasons for poor women (eventually all women) to have abortions...The rights involved go beyond the religious, the moral, go back to the ages old attempt of males to control the fertility of females. (OEB 178)

Butler's statement conveys that in instances of sexual violence, like rape, a woman is not the one that is seen as being violated, but rather, the man's "rights" are the only ones considered. She speculates that if the roles were reversed, more women (especially women of color) who are subject to sexual abuse and violence would get the help they need. Butler also remarks on the fact that this is an issue of ownership and power, that a man feels entitled to control a woman's body, even if it has been violated. Sexual violence toward women of color was another huge issue during the 1970s because sexual violence was ultimately about "power, not desire" and "intimately related to women's rights to control their own bodies" (Valk 162, 163).

Even though Butler highlights Doro's sexual exploitation, violence, and control over Anyanwu's reproduction, she also imagines Anyanwu as a powerful black woman with total autonomy over her body to challenge what she was seeing in the world at the time. In one scene, Anyanwu exemplifies the power she has in making her own choices about whether to reproduce children: "Within her body, she killed his [Doro's] seed. She disconnected the two small tubes through which her own seed traveled to her womb. She had done this many times when she thought she had given a man enough children. Now she did it to avoid giving any children at all,

to avoid being used” (Butler 131). Here Butler illustrates Anyanwu’s decision to have an abortion by killing the seed in her womb, which she also states is something she has been doing even before Doro came along and when she felt she had enough children with a man. This scenario re-envisioned family-planning for women of color if given the proper access to birth control, specifically abortions. Moreover, Anyanwu is conscious of a man’s need for power over a woman’s reproduction which is why she also chooses when to do it and avoid being used by her husbands or lovers.

Butler portrays Anyanwu as a black woman who can reclaim power over her body because she can choose to abort, but also by formulating other forms of birth control too, like tubal ligation. She effectively performs her own tubal ligation procedure (which can be reversed) when she disconnects the tubes inside of her so that the sperm cannot travel to her eggs. I will discuss other examples of Anyanwu’s ability to generate alternative forms of scientific procedures later in my analysis, but I want to emphasize here that she is reclaiming power over her body and reproduction to achieve some sort of reproductive justice. Ross and Solinger explain that, “Reproductive justice clarifies the need for protection from coerced sex and reproduction and also from coerced suppression or termination of fertility” (17). While Anyanwu does not achieve all three principles of reproductive justice that I have noted earlier in this chapter, her powers do grant her the ability to choose whether to have children. Unfortunately, Anyanwu struggles making this choice because Doro consistently threatens to kill her and consume her body if she does not obey him. Ultimately, through Anyanwu’s abilities, Butler theorizes what access to safe affordable reproductive health care and birth control could look like for poor women of color in the future.

*Wild Seed* also pushes the boundaries of reproduction and challenges eugenics by restructuring the traditional heteronormative family through an interracial and same-sex relationship between Anyanwu and another woman named Denise; and proposes the possibilities for having children with biotechnologies like genetic engineering. Although Melzer discusses the genderqueer identities of Doro and Anyanwu (as mentioned earlier), my analysis focuses on Anyanwu's gender and racial fluidity that disrupt white heteronormative structures of the family and imagines mixed queer families instead. Moreover, Anyanwu and Denise's relationship undermine the other side of the eugenic agenda, which held that "homosexuals were a menace to civilization and, if allowed to 'recruit' and proliferate, would destroy the modern family" (Stern 220). Doro does not care about interracial coupling because he wants the person's genes to create the perfect immortal being, but Anyanwu, on the other hand, engages in an interracial relationship out of love.

Even though the 1970's witnessed many victories for both women and people of color – women of color were often caught in a cross-fire between the two. As I mentioned earlier, scholars like hooks and the Combahee River Collective challenged the reproductive rights that were "won" because, compared to white middle-class women, women of color endured the racial and classist consequences and suffered with forced sterilizations. On the other hand, women of color were also pressured by their own ethnic groups to prevent this racial genocide by having even *more* children and condemning same-sex relationships. For example, Roberts explains that, "Many women in the Black liberation movement rejected their brothers' charge to them to bear more children" – once again, there was a more pressing issue of powerful men trying to control a woman's body and reproduction (100). To make matters for women of color even more complicated, those who identified as lesbian felt unwelcome in both spaces. In *This Bridge*

*Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga reflects on this conflict, explaining, “My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings” (23). Butler addresses these internalized heteronormative ideologies about relationships, family, and reproduction by challenging eugenics’ racial and gender perspectives through Anyanwu and Denise’s partnership.

I also want to note that Anyanwu and Denise’s relationship takes place after she has escaped Doro and created her own life, a short-lived moment of freedom, but part of a bigger move toward a critical dystopia which I will be discussing in my final section. Despite Doro’s own mixing of people and hijacking both men and women’s bodies to reproduce (although he identifies as a man), he is shocked by Anyanwu’s same-sex and interracial marriage to Denise. Anyanwu explains how she and Denise began their relationship despite the intense racism and sexism that existed:

“...we started to want each other.”  
“Even though she knew you were a woman and black?”  
“Even so.” (Butler 233).

Anyanwu’s terse response “Even so” delivers a powerful message that love, relationships and marriage do not need to be defined by the racist politics that discourage interracial coupling, nor the heteronormative gender politics that say only a man and woman can be together. Butler reimagines new family dynamics, in this case, mixed queer families that are loved and accepted.

Her attitude toward interracial coupling is clear in one of her notes that say: “All this is nonsense, of course. Appearances. Bullshit. I am not fearsome. Blackness is not a sign of fearsomeness” (OEB 178). Yet appearances are exactly what Butler gives Anyanwu the ability to manipulate and this is what makes the relationship between Anyanwu and Denise possible in the

first place. When Anyanwu and Denise get together it is during the Antebellum period and because of this historical reality, Butler expertly navigates these racist politics by giving Anyanwu the power to genetically engineer and alter herself on the surface level as a white man, and eliminate the possibility for her genetic traits as a black woman to be passed on to her and Denise's offspring for fear of ostracization and even death. Butler conducted research on biotechnology, including "genetic discoveries, disorder and cures, gene mapping and genetic engineering" which evidently influenced the ways Anyanwu can transform at varying levels of physical and biological human and non-human forms (OEB 155). Butler illustrates what a queer interracial relationship and eventually family would look like, but only by making Anyanwu transform into a white man named Edward Warrick that can legally marry Denise, and because Anyanwu can genetically engineer what their children look like, too.

Anyanwu tells Doro it is only through her reproductive *freedom* that she could fully explore her body and reproductive powers to discover that "I can make it over so completely in the image of someone else that I am not longer truly related to my parents. It makes me wonder what I am - that I can do this and still know myself, still return to my true shape" (Butler 233). Moreover, Butler's research notecards convey her interest in genetic engineering as well as transplantation procedures like autografts that allow bringing "one area of an individual's body to another" and "between members of the same species, such as human to human" (OEB 155). Butler's research informed Anyanwu's abilities to essentially transplant the human form of someone she conjures up in her head (like Edward Warwick) to her own shape and use genetic engineering and gene mapping to create and reproduce white children (although they truly come from an interracial same-sex couple).<sup>73</sup> Even though Butler gives Anyanwu powers that allow

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<sup>73</sup> I also want to note that in Butler's notes on *Wild Seed*, she purposely makes Anyanwu always inherently female "if she gets boys, they will be, literally the children who's form she has copies....She has no Y chromosomes of her

her to reshape into anyone she wants from the inside out, she also acknowledges that in a racist society, one must navigate race and gender carefully to survive, which is why Anyanwu renegotiates her race and gender to be with Denise. At the same time, Butler offers us the possibility for interracial queer families to challenge the backlash some women of color were facing among ethnic groups and societal constructions of the heteronormative family.

Butler applies her speculative theory further based on her research on xenograft transplants to contemplate species transplantation and even alternative forms of reproduction, such as surrogacy. On her research notecard labeled “xenografts,” Butler writes about the ability to transfer “from one species to another such as monkey to human” and this seems to inform her decision to make Anyanwu transform into a dolphin and have offspring (OEB 155). Anyanwu shows that her power transcends even human biology because she can transform her genetic makeup to become an animal, in this case a dolphin. She explains, “I bore dolphin young – and they were dolphins. Not human at all” and this suggests a vision of the future with alternative forms of reproduction that were not as well known in the 1970s as they are today (Butler 234). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of surrogacy has been popularized and capitalized on by fertility clinics that offer couples the ability to have children by undergoing In-Vitro-Fertilization (IVF) or outsourcing other women’s bodies as surrogate mothers to have their baby.<sup>74</sup> In Melinda Cooper’s and Catherine Waldby’s *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, they discuss the emergence of fertility outsourcing as a new preferred form of reproductive and clinical labor (38). Unfortunately, the looming

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own carrying her characteristics” and this illustrates that Butler privileges a woman’s genetic makeup, body and reproductive choices above all – even if Anyanwu chooses to be a man (OEB 164)

<sup>74</sup> According to the *American Pregnancy Association*, IVF is defined as a “assisted reproductive technology (ART) commonly referred to as IVF. IVF is the process of fertilization by extracting eggs, retrieving a sperm sample, and then manually combining an egg and sperm in a laboratory dish. The embryo(s) is then transferred to the uterus” sometimes within the mother herself, or surrogate mother willing to carry the baby to term.

history of eugenics still tend to affect even this new form of reproduction and perpetuates better breeding methods from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, those who choose to donate sperm or eggs, or become surrogate mothers, must go through a rigorous evaluation process to determine if they meet certain criteria of intelligence and health. In some cases, fertility corporations even try recruiting young people from Ivy League schools to be “handsomely paid if they meet the buyer’s exacting selection criteria” as potential donors or surrogates because they are perceived as having the highest quality of genetics to buyers (Cooper and Waldby 38, 48). In other words, Anyanwu’s role as a type of surrogate mother to her dolphin offspring shows Butler’s speculative theorizing on how alternative forms of reproduction may take shape in the future, especially biotechnologies like IVF.

Furthermore, Butler imagines the future of xenotransplantation from animals to humans, which is an area of study for scientists hoping to use animal organs for humans today. According to a 2018 study in *Discover Magazine*, there is always a demand for organs, and therefore animals have become the alternative solution. This article explains that scientists have been performing these trials with pig hearts in baboons and hope to begin human trials in the near future. *Wild Seed* challenges some of the limitations of eugenics, reproduction, and even animal-to-human transplants because Butler extrapolated and reimagined different futures for women of color and humanity beyond the confines of her dystopian realities in the 1970s. But Butler’s move toward a critical dystopia is most explicit when Anyanwu escapes Doro to make a real family that embodies the inclusivity that Doro’s “multicultural” colonies lacked and grants her the full reproductive justice she desires.

When Anyanwu escapes Doro and makes a life for herself on a plantation, she appears to move toward a critical dystopia that rejects the heteronormative family as well as the façade of

multiculturalism and eugenic reproductive practices through her collective family she has made there and achieving true freedom and reproductive justice. But at the same time, a critical dystopia fails to reach its full potential because it just seems to be another utopian version of Doro's own colonies – and eventually gets absorbed into that dystopian world again when he returns. I have already discussed how Anyanwu rejected some of the ideas about eugenics and heteronormative families through her queer interracial marriage with Denise. For the purpose of this section, however, I want to emphasize her success in gaining some reproductive freedom and justice. When Doro finds Anyanwu, he accuses her of trying to reproduce his same eugenic vision, saying “I find you in competition with me, raising witches of your own” (Butler 231). Doro exposes her hypocrisy because she seeks out the same people as he does, but she justifies this by explaining, “They need me...those people” and “They need someone who can help them, and I can help. You don't want to help them, you want to use them,” ultimately affirming “I'm a healer, Doro” (Butler 231). Anyanwu's response signifies her shift from Doro's own manipulative use of multiculturalism to promote inclusivity, to that of the healing mother who accepts all her children and loves them the same, and not just for the powers they have.

While Doro uses multiculturalism in a way that makes “unequal power relationships by representing them as equal differences,” Anyanwu sees those on the plantation (both blood and non-blood related) as equals, as family (Davis 44). In relation to reproductive justice, Anyanwu has achieved all three principles because she chooses whether to have children, but more important, has created the safe and healthy environment to raise them in as well.<sup>75</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>75</sup> This moment may also allude to Ross and Solinger's explanation of “new laws [that] directed schools to develop in-building programs for pregnant and parenting teens” because of the “phenomenon of respectable white single motherhood” and here, Butler proposes what single motherhood and reproductive justice for women of color would look like through Anyanwu (48). Moreover, this speaks to the point that women of color activists were trying to get white feminists to understand about “choice” specifically that “They argued that the right to have a child was crucial to a women's dignity and safety (and the dignity and safety of her community) as the right to prevent conception” (Ross and Solinger 55).



Anyanwu's explanation conveys her role as a healer because of the special knowledge she possesses. She is a kind of living archive for those super beings on the plantation because she knows first-hand about their suffering and can help them through it. She adds, "I don't need new bodies as you do. All I need is my own kind around me. My family or people who feel like my family" which suggests two things (Butler 237). First, she captures the spirit of a critical dystopia because her collective family rejects Doro's power and everything he stood for.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, she does seem to contradict herself because she echoes the eugenic vision of Doro by welcoming her "own kind" to live in this utopian world free of sexual exploitation and oppression.

Anyanwu's attachment to this utopian vision is what ultimately destabilizes and undermines the possibility for a strong critical dystopia. Anyanwu has achieved the reproductive justice and freedom she sought when she was with Doro, but the issue is that she idealizes her utopian plantation full of people like her, ultimately hiding them from the world, and more important, from organizing to *change* the world together. Anyanwu has the makings of a potentially transformative critical dystopia because collectively these super beings have the physical and mental powers to revolutionize and destroy all those institutions of power that oppress and exploit them, like Doro, but instead, she welcomes him back into her life. Even though Anyanwu explains that "She stopped him from destroying his breeders after they had served him" and that "He did not command her any longer" or "interfere with her children at all," the ending of the novel is still unsettling and leaves room for the dystopian realities she endured to reemerge in the future with Doro (Butler 296). Even though she seems to have made

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<sup>76</sup> This also resonates with the ideologies of reproductive justice because, "women of color sought to put an end to the political structure that had defined their babies as 'unwanted' and made their own bodies into targets for sterilization" (Ross and Solinger 52).

some impact on him, especially regarding reproductive justice and freedom, she still believes in his vision to breed more super beings.

In a note on one of Butler's *Wild Seed* manuscripts, she explains that Anyanwu ultimately wants to "believe in the new race idea" (OEB 164). Thus, this open-ending invites plenty of speculation about what these two immortal beings might accomplish together, but I argue that was the point Butler was trying to make as a HistoFuturist, researcher, and journal writer. In one of her folders titled "Why I write," one of her notes states, "Writers must have the ego to create worlds, the emotional exhibitionism to publish fragments of their lives—their actual lives, their fantasy lives, and the lives of the people around them" (OEB 146). Consequently, Butler's *Wild Seed* does not necessarily offer solutions for all the political and sociological issues around her, but she does criticize them, raises thought-provoking and uncomfortable questions, and acknowledges the "fragments of their lives" and her own life in the everchanging world around her.

*Wild Seed* provides a rich alternate history based on Butler's research on the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries that she uses as the backdrop for her narrative, but also the contentious realities she wrote about in her journal entries and her lived experiences as a black woman, that also affected many other people of color who faced the institutionalized racism and sexism of eugenics, reproductive freedom and rights, and emerging multiculturalism at the time of the 1976 Bicentennial during the 1970s. Streeby refers to Butler's research and archiving as a practice of "constellating" artifacts to be added to her palimpsest of ideas about the past, present and future, and supported the speculative theorizing she writes in her stories to "make generative intersectional connections" for "science, politics, social issues, and the environment" (726). In a later chapter on *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*, I will analyze the significance of creating a future-

history archive but want to recognize Butler's own engagement in doing this type of world making and archival work as a HistoFuturist. I hope that *Wild Seed* will make its way back into the current public discourse, especially with reproductive rights being threatened once again and its representation in television series such as *The Handmaid's Tale*.<sup>77</sup>

In the Hulu television series called *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* (2019) an origin story of the group Wu-Tang Clan, one of the episodes shows the young black woman, Shurrie, reading *Wild Seed*. This story is set in New York City during the 1990s and it is not a coincidence that Shurrie is reading Butler's work.<sup>78</sup> Shurrie faces a dilemma later in the series of whether to keep or abort her baby; or give up her dreams of going to college to raise a family. The metanarrative that *Wild Seed* gives to this larger narrative in *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* illustrates the relevancy of the message this novel makes about reproductive freedom and justice, and specifically that a black woman like Shurrie, should be able to make these choices and have autonomy over her body.

Recently, Amazon announced plans to release a *Wild Seed* series spearheaded by several brilliant black women: Oscar winner Viola Davis, science fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor and the *Rafiki* filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu. I am hopeful that this series will shift some of the conversations generated from *The Handmaid's Tale* series, although I do not deny their importance, to one more focused on women of color. My hope is that the *Wild Seed* series will better address the varying levels of oppression and exploitation that people of color, and women of color

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<sup>77</sup> *The Washington Post* reported in May 2019 that states like Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Utah passed new antiabortion "heartbeat bills" that would effectively overturn the *Roe v. Wade* legislation and reproduced the attack on women's reproductive rights once again.

<sup>78</sup> The 1990's infamously attacked reproductive rights again by stereotyping black women as "welfare queens" or accused them of producing "crack babies" that suggested black women were "calculating parasites" that needed to continue being sterilized because their children were perceived as "incapable of contributing anything positive to society" and "The new biodeterminism presents drugs, poverty, and race as interchangeable marks that inevitably consign Black children to a worthless future" (Roberts 17-20).

especially, have endured in the past, continue to live through in the present, and will hopefully resist and change in the future. I will conclude my analysis with a final message from Butler's personal journal and her purpose to "Make your readers believe you, and make them care," a message that certainly reverberates throughout *Wild Seed* and will likely spur new conversations and interpretations among a wide audience in its television debut (OEB 178). In my next chapter, I analyze how film and the concept of speculative horror, addresses other threats on black people and black bodies through criminalization, mass incarceration and exploitation in Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*.

#### Chapter 4: Real and Imagined Speculative Horrors in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

“Once you’re in prison, there are plenty of jobs, and, if you don’t want to work, they beat you up and throw you in a hole. If every state had to pay workers to do the jobs prisoners are forced to do, the salaries would amount to billions... Prisons are a profitable business. They are a way of legally perpetuating slavery. In every state more and more prisons are being built and even more are on the drawing board. Who are they for? They certainly aren’t planning to put white people in them. Prisons are part of this government’s genocidal war against Black and Third World people.” – Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*

Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more writers of color were writing their own science fiction and speculative fiction stories and breaking into the mainstream literary world. Prolific writers such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler were being recognized and the ideas about the future were being rewritten to include people of color. In 1992, a black writer named Derrick Bell published a short story called “The Space Traders,” a narrative that speculates on the literal trading and abduction of black people from Earth. Later, this story was adapted into a short film as part of the *Cosmic Slop* series in 1994. In this story, aliens propose a deal with the US government to exchange their black people (with the valuable melanin they possess) for total economic and environmental repair. Despite the protests from black groups, even those holding an official title in the government, the trade is agreed upon. I want to draw attention to this specific story-turned-film because it is an example of how black people’s fears of erasure and exploitation were explicitly visualized on screen for a larger audience. “The Space Traders” highlights the fears that black people face daily, and this contributes to the concept I call “speculative horror,” which is the basis for my argument in this chapter on Jordan Peele’s Oscar-winning film *Get Out* (2017).

On Twitter, Peele classified his film as a documentary, and even though this was received as sarcasm, it was a serious statement about what *Get Out* hoped to achieve among audiences. Peele’s film offers a glimpse into the fears of black people that may be perceived as imaginary,

but he also twists and plays out other scenarios in this film's narrative. While "The Space Traders" underscores the fear of the complete decimation and erasure of black people and black lives from planet Earth, *Get Out* grapples with similar ideas of abduction and exploitation, but leaves the remains of a black person's unconscious within the "sunken place" that becomes a form of captivity rather than total erasure. In *Get Out*, the concept of utopia is created by the fantasies of a white family, the Armitages, who abduct and commodify black people and their black bodies to extend white life in their secluded community. I illustrate how this film uses the concept of speculative horror to combine the elements of speculative fiction and the horror film genre to express fears of black people in the context of violent histories of incarceration, criminalization, exploitation, and commodification of their lives and bodies. Moreover, these ideas resonated with my earlier explorations of violent histories about racist science, experimentation, and slavery. In this film, the white utopian fantasy is achieved, and black people are sentenced to life in the dystopian sunken place to watch their lives from a far with no control, they are completely powerless. *Get Out* uses visual storytelling to represent the fears that black people experience every day, and suggests that speculative horror is rooted in white violence in the past and present.

What is the connection between speculative fiction and horror that creates the keyword speculative horror? As I have stated in the introduction to *Reclaiming the Future*, I use speculative fiction as an umbrella term to encapsulate the range of genres that may fall within it, including horror. More important, the use of speculative fiction by people of color in this context underscores lived experiences, especially in the film *Get Out*. Horror, on the other hand, responds to an ever-changing history that continues to be redefined and rearticulated, and now Jordan Peele is a creator of color in the film industry who uses horror as a tool to capture a

nightmarish and fearful narrative through the eyes of a black individual, in this case the protagonist of *Get Out*, Chris. I want to focus on horror partly because some of the most successful films coming from this genre have been low-budget and independent. From slasher films in the 1980s (*Halloween*) to J-horror films coming from Japan in the 2000's (*The Ring*), the definition of horror itself is constantly being challenged, something consistently happening to speculative fiction as well. In Murray Leeder's *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction*, he identifies *Get Out* as "a topical issue picture but also an effective paranoid horror film" that draws inspiration from films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Eyes Without a Face*, and especially *The Stepford Wives* (87). Leeder's description of *Get Out* as "topical" refers to social and racial issues, yet it follows this "paranoid horror" found in well-known science fiction and speculative fiction films. In fact, the genesis of horror and science fiction came about around the same time. Leeder states, "horror's boundaries have historically been closest to science fiction and fantasy 'science fiction,' for instance, only became widespread in the 1930s, right around the same time as 'horror'" (102). I argue the concept of speculative horror in *Get Out* highlights the overlap between speculative fiction, science fiction, and horror; and also connects to what a paranoid horror film might imagine, with real scenarios for black people in contemporary society. Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* also makes the points that black people's experiences need to be shown differently on screen since, "blackness and race are often present in SF films as narrative subtext or implicit allegorical subject" (2). This is why *Get Out* is such a significant work: because it focuses on blackness and race, particularly black lives and black bodies, to imagine a possible dystopian future shaped by white supremacist ideologies.

Nama suggests that “The intersection of blackness and the SF film aesthetic marks the struggle to imagine a new form of black cultural reproduction that creates new reference points for race, identity, and space in the immediate and far-off future” (170). I use speculative horror as a keyword in this chapter to unpack the social and racial issues brought about in *Get Out*. I also use this key word to explore its relationship to techniques found in speculative fiction, such as imaginary scenarios, and the dystopian and utopian. Moreover, I use it to illustrate aspects of horror, such as paranoia, mind-control (hypnosis), and strategic cinematic images, angles, and expressions that altogether, convey the everyday criminalization, incarceration, and commodification of black people and black bodies both historically and in contemporary society. I will discuss these issues of incarceration and criminalization in my next section through the representation of the sunken place in this film, and the commodification of black bodies and the concept of pornotropic following that analysis.

In an *IndieWire* interview with Jordan Peele, he reveals the significance of the sunken place in his film, particularly in relation to prisons and the representation of black people in horror overall. He explains that:

...the sunken place is this metaphor for the system that is suppressing the freedom of black people, of many outsiders, many minorities. There’s lots of different sunken places. But this one specifically became a metaphor for the prison-industrial complex, the lack of representation of black people in film, in genre. The reason Chris in the film is falling into this place, being forced to watch this screen, [is] that no matter how hard he screams at the screen he can’t get agency across. He’s not represented. And that, to me, was this metaphor for the black horror audience, a very loyal fan base who comes to these movies, and we’re the ones that are going to die first. So the movie for me became almost about representation within the genre, within itself, in a weird way. (Peele)

Peele asserts the sunken place is a representation of the prison system that seeks to strip people of color of their freedom. But he also applies the metaphor of the sunken place to the film industry and its lack of representation of black people. Peele’s film seeks to address these issues



by highlighting the sunken place as a tool that oppresses black people and their freedom, a reality for many within the prison system. Additionally, he centers a black person's experience in the face of mass incarceration and criminalization on screen for a large audience to witness and understand.

In Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, she provides a comprehensive analysis of California's history and evolution toward becoming a highly populated prison state, especially during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She explains that people of color, especially black people and Latinos, make up two-thirds of the state's 160,000 prisoners, seven percent of which are women of all races, and 25 percent noncitizens (7). With Peele's comment and this data from Gilmore, this raises the question of: why does this institution seek to imprison and silence people of color? What are they being punished for and is it done ethically? According to Gilmore's work, the ideas of crime, law and order, and ultimately social control are problematic because "crime is not fixed, it follows that crime's relationship to prisons is the outcome of social theory and practice" which in this case formulates what I argue can be perceived as a type of Frankenstein's monster-like "reassembling" of the mind (as we saw in *Of One Blood*). Consequently, the idea of mind control is one of the main factors of *Get Out*, and according to this idea of social theory, the rationale to lock people up is about: "retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, or incapacitation" (Gilmore 13-14).

Yet, these social theories prove to isolate communities and even increase crime. Gilmore references Mauer and Chesney-Lind and states, "prisons wear out places by wearing out people" (17). This can be taken in the literal sense for *Get Out*, since the white Armitage family "wears" the bodies and consumes the lives of black people by imprisoning them in the depths of the

sunken place. The larger issue is, why do black people, especially black men, get criminalized and imprisoned more than others? Gilmore refers to this as a type of “racial cleansing” that developed laws meant to police and prosecute young black men especially (20).<sup>79</sup> Gilmore’s work argues that prisons are in part, “partial geographical solutions to political economic crises” that resonate with the early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries recession and economic depression, as well as the rise of white supremacy and violence toward black people in the President Trump era. In my analysis, I connect the criminalization and mass incarceration of black people with scholarly works such as Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* to convey the contemporary legalized discrimination that draws from Jim Crow laws as a result of mass incarceration, and affects black people and black communities by demonizing them even when they are released from prison, and prevents them from obtaining true freedom that creates “a cruel new phase of stigmatization and control” (17). Furthermore, I want to discuss the concepts of commodification and the pornotropic, specifically their effects on black people and black bodies, because they are central to my reading of *Get Out* and resonate with violent histories of slavery, racist science, and experimentation that continue the conversations from *Of One Blood* and *Wild Seed*.

The most terrifying aspect of *Get Out* for a black person is the idea that a white individual can buy your mind and body, replace it with his or her own, and extend his or her life. For this reason, black bodies as commodities and as objects for consumption are a primary factor in what makes this film a horror story. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* bell hooks writes, “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live

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<sup>79</sup> Gilmore adds that “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” a fact that resonates with the victims in *Get Out* who suffer a semi-premature death to extend white lives through the transplantation procedure known as the Coagula (28).

with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness” (175). In hooks’s chapter on “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” she explains the fear that has evolved as a result of the power of whiteness and the psychological mark it has left on black people throughout history. In *Get Out*, the power of whiteness manifests itself in the Armitage family and their business in capturing, subduing, and enslaving black people when they take over their minds and bodies. This film illustrates the imagined beliefs that black people and black bodies are valuable commodities that possess superior strength, speed, or in some cases sexual performativity. Nonetheless, black people in this film are viewed as objects that can be consumed by a consumer, which connects to the concept of the pornotrope and slavery.

I refer to Alexander G. Weheliye’s article on “Pornotropes” to analyze these connections between sexuality and slavery (pornotrope). Weheliye refers to Hortense Spillers’s definition of pornotrope as a “distinction between body and flesh” that “focuses on the process through which slaves are transformed into flesh and then subjected to the (un)pleasure of the viewing sovereign subject” (71). In *Get Out*, this is exactly what happens when a black individual is captured by the Armitage family. He or she is transformed into simply “body and flesh” for the white-paying customer to transplant his or her life into a black body, and the black victim sees the one who has power over him or her through the small window above the sunken place. In this film, the idea of the pornotrope gets complicated because the victim is not only objectified as body and flesh, but still shares the same consciousness, albeit buried deep within, but still living inside somewhere. In Vincent Woodard’s work titled *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*, he explains that the desire for a black body for consumption can be traced back to slavery and the fact that, “the white person’s cultivated hunger for black flesh and soul” was undeniable (140). These concepts are especially important

in a scene of *Get Out* centered around the auctioning of Chris (unbeknownst to him) and the imagined assumptions that the white buyers have about black people and their black bodies, simply because they perceive them as commodities.

Since its release in 2017, *Get Out* has generated debates among academics, film critics, and moviegoers everywhere. This film's wild success earned itself the ultimate achievement, an Oscar in 2018 for Best Original Screenplay, an honor Peele accepted and that marked the first time an African American won this award in Hollywood history. From the wealth of conspiracy theories about the film on YouTube, to the course at UCLA developed by Tananarive Due titled, "The Sunken Place: Racism, Survival, and Black Horror Aesthetic," there was plenty to say about this blockbuster hit. More important though, this film brought attention to black film makers and a perspective not always recognized in horror, as Peele stated in his interview. Work by scholars such as Rizvana Bradley, J.T. Roane and Camilla Fojas analyzes many of the subtexts that this film exposes regarding the oppression and criminalization of black people and their communities. Bradley suggests that the film represents a type of "black body snatching" through the device of the sunken place and draws from the metaphor of subjection that Saidiya Hartman theorizes (46). For the most part, however, Bradley argues for a "potential reinvention of the horror genre" and focuses specifically on the symbol of black motherhood in the twisted "reanimation" of the white Grandmother Armitage in the body of the black maid, Georgina (47).

While I build on certain aspects of Bradley's work, particularly on the concept of body snatching and the reanimation of the black body that alludes to a new version of slavery, I am focused on scenarios that convey black people's fears of criminalization, incarceration and commodification. I refer to Roane's work to build on his concept of "repurposing" the black body to extend white life, and particularly how this formulates the Frankenstein's monster

narrative present in *Get Out* and functions as the justification for the reassembling of black lives and black bodies for the benefit of the white utopian goals for immortality and power. Roane also addresses the pornotrope and the commodification of black bodies that he expresses as “black flesh as discardable,” but I argue for the literal consumption undertaken by the white individual when taking over the black person’s life and body. Also, I build on Camilla Fojas’s analysis of the racial and ethnic stereotypes of people of color represented in film who are deemed “uncivilized, subhuman or disposable subjects” and the “disembodying forces of white supremacy” found in *Get Out* (33, 41).

While *Get Out* has stirred a lot of conversation, my analysis shows how speculative fiction and horror are working together to illustrate fears that black people have based on their lived experiences. This chapter will continue to build on these emerging conversations and contribute a new perspective of speculative horror to capture the significance of people of color creating alternative stories about the past, present, and future that address larger issues of institutional racism, especially the mass incarceration, criminalization, and commodification of black people, black bodies, and black lives.

The opening scene of *Get Out* sets the tone for the film by using speculative horror to convey the fears of a black person being criminalized in a wealthy neighborhood, and in this case an example where Peele confirms a black person’s fear of being a subject for abduction. The character in this scene, Dre, is cautiously walking through a neighborhood he identifies as a “creepy” suburb at night talking to an unknown person on the phone.<sup>80</sup> The cinematography displays a mix between darkness and shadows, and momentary streams of light when Dre passes a light pole. Dre is almost invisible in the darkness and he is shown in stark contrast to the large

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<sup>80</sup> Dre is also the man named Logan, who we encounter again during the Armitage’s party.

well-lit and white-painted homes surrounding him. As he walks by a dog barks at him and this suggests a warning that this is not where he belongs: he is not welcome. Dre expresses his fears of being a black man in this wealthy neighborhood, and the fact that he is vulnerable to being criminalized or worse. Dre observes, “Feel like a sore thumb out here” and says “You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here,” to explain that his fears are not simply imaginary, and that history has shown that black men like him have been targets for being criminalized and accused of wrongdoing simply by being out of place (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: Dre walking in the suburbs. *Get Out* (2017).

But does Dre have anything to fear? I argue that he does not simply feel this way because this is a horror film and the environment and score indicate this to viewers, but rather, the speculative horror that emerges in this case is the fact that Dre’s fears as a black man are often perceived as imaginary by others who deny that institutional racism exists, and that no one is out to get him, that it is all conspiracy. History and society, on the other hand, tell us otherwise. In 2012, a real-life scenario that echoes this one occurred when a 17-year old black boy still in high school, Trayvon Martin, was shot by George Zimmerman, a civilian with a license to carry a firearm, who saw a “threatening” hooded figure (Martin) and killed him, and then was acquitted at trial for “self-defense” in Florida. From this example, a black person’s fear of being criminalized and as a result, incarcerated, or worse, killed, is grounded in truth and reality. Peele

uses speculative fiction and horror to play out this imagined scenario but connects it to the real-life context and consequences of black people and black lives that have been taken as a result of being criminalized.

In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander explains that “more than half of the young black men in any large American city are currently under the control of the criminal justice system” and she states that the common belief is that this is because of bad choices or poverty, but she argues it is a “new racial caste system” of legalized discrimination that can be tied back to Jim Crow in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that is targeting and denying rights to black people in contemporary society (16). Dre’s presence in this neighborhood, as this scene suggests, is perceived as a “criminal” act because he does not belong there. Peele shifts the narrative, however, into a style of speculative horror that also imagines the literal abduction of Dre, and explicitly conveys the victimization of a black man and the violence on his black body when he is hit over the head and dragged into the trunk of a white car by an ominous figure (see Figure 4.2). As I mentioned earlier, this scene sets the tone for the rest of the film by foreshadowing the abduction of black people by white people who are commodifying them as objects to be bought and consumed and trapping them within the depths of the sunken place to be forgotten and eventually erased from the public’s imagination and society. My analysis also explores the ways that Peele’s film reverses stereotypes and emphasizes how black people’s fears of white people are real because they come from generations of violent histories when being subject to policing, criminalization, commodification, and exploitation for their black bodies.



Figure 4.2: Dre being abducted. *Get Out* (2017).

This scene echoes contemporary moments, too, when black men have been wrongly accused of a criminal act and killed because of it.<sup>81</sup> Most recently in September 2018, a 26-year old black man named Botham Shem Jean was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer in Dallas who believed he had broken into her apartment, which she mistook for her own. This example directly connects to this opening scene because both Jean and Dre were “out of place” as black men in their respective environment (although Jean did live there), and because of this racialization, are imagined as a criminal to be violently shot, and with Dre, abducted to “cleanse” the suburban white utopian imagination. This notion of a utopian society, especially following a white supremacist ideology, was the rationale for prison expansion and development (especially in California) to “prevent people from committing crimes by keeping them in cages for as long as possible,” or murdering them in the case of Jean (Gilmore 107).<sup>82</sup>

In her chapter on “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” hooks’s analysis illuminates this white supremacist and utopian imagination by explaining that white people “can live as though black people are invisible, and they can imagine that they are also invisible to black [people]” (168). While this first scene contains many instances that convey the

<sup>81</sup> Such as the example I referred to earlier in this section about Trayvon Martin.

<sup>82</sup> Gilmore explains that “Black people have the highest rate of incarceration of any racial/ethnic grouping in California, or, for that matter, in the United States” (111).



goals of a white utopian society where black people are not to be found wandering the streets, and are locked up away somewhere, Peele challenges this idea by uniting white and black people in a twisted procedure of transplantation (the Coagula). I discuss this reassembling and unification of the two identities later in my chapter, but first I want to call attention to another scene that portrays the speculative horror that our protagonist, Chris, first encounters at the hands of the authorities, and before he enters the true house of horrors with the Armitage family.

When Chris and Rose are driving toward her family's home, this scene uses speculative horror to focus on black people's every day fears, specifically being racially profiled and criminalized for "driving while black," and illustrates the real-life scenario of a society structured by racial hierarchies and white supremacy that assume a black person's wrongdoing even when they try to be invisible, silent, and compliant. Driving while black is a concept that emerges from the anecdotal experiences of black people when they are stopped by the police, but is also statistically true according to scholars such as Charles Epp and Steven Maynard-Moody. More often than any other race, black people are subject to an "investigatory stop" as opposed to a legitimate traffic safety law violation, and a survey revealed that "a black man age twenty-five or younger has a 28 percent chance of being stopped," but being young and black is not the only cause for suspicion from police (Epp and Maynard-Moody). In fact, a black man has to be almost fifty-years old just to have less of a chance of being stopped and investigated because that is when "investigatory stop drops below that of a white man under age twenty-five" (Epp and Maynard-Moody). In Epp and Maynard-Moody's study, they found that "black drivers in our survey were *five times* more likely than whites to be subjected to searches in investigatory stops." The concept of driving while black is not imaginary, but a reality, and a *real* fear that black people experience in their everyday lives.

I want to distinguish this scene, however, from the opening one because it is not a typical horror scene. Driving on what seems like an endless road surrounded by nothing but trees may suggest perhaps a kind of escape for Chris from the discrimination he faces as a black man in the city. Although he expresses some anxiety about meeting his white girlfriend's (Rose) family, he is hopeful that their interracial relationship will be accepted. The horror in this scene emerges when Rose accidentally hits and kills a deer on the road. Chris is traumatized by this event, something that is triggered by his own feelings of guilt when his mother was hit by a car and killed. The speculative horror that develops in this scene comes when he has separated himself from the conversation that Rose is having with an officer. Chris is sitting at the front of the car while Rose and the officer are on the driver's side. Despite this separation between them, the officer collects the information he needs from Rose and asks Chris for his ID as well. This scene shows the speculative horror for Chris even in his silent, invisible, and compliant presence before the authorities.

I want to underscore the significance of this scene that Peele speculates on because it is rooted in a contemporary context where black people only seem to be visible when they appear as a threat, even when they are completely helpless. For example, in 2009 Oscar Grant was shot and killed by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer on his way home from a New Year's party in Oakland, California while being pinned down. In addition, in 2017, Eric Garner was shown in a video being pinned down by a police officer repeatedly pleading that he could not breathe, and these examples reinforce the unjust criminalization of black people who live in fear of the threat authorities imagine is posed by a "suspicious" black man. Chris does not hesitate to present his identification when asked because he recognizes the threat to his life if he does not comply with the officer's request. Rose, on the other hand, questions the officer's racial

profiling, to which he responds that in any incident they can choose to interrogate whomever they want. Rose states, “he didn’t do anything wrong,” and the officer does not give a strong rationale for asking. When he receives a radio message about whether he needs help, he reports everything is clear, but without Rose’s intervention the speculative horror of this scene might have resulted in examples like the ones above where a lone black man is wrongly criminalized and sometimes even killed.

While white people’s fear of black people and imagining they are a threat is illustrated in this scene, hooks states that the “power of whiteness” is what black people fear the most, something they try to avoid and are terrorized by (175). In this case, Peele draws from a black person’s fear of being racially profiled and criminalized for driving while black and being pulled over and interrogated. In another study by David A. Harris, he explains that black people become suspects no matter where they are going when they get in the car, and “Skin color becomes evidence, and race becomes a proxy for general criminal propensity” (37). In this way, the power of whiteness, especially from an authoritarian position such as a police officer is shown in two ways, one with the officer’s terrorizing presence, as well as with Rose’s use of her own privilege as an attempt to protect and advocate on behalf of Chris. During this exchange, Chris hardly says a word as his fate is ultimately determined by the two forms of white power between him.

This illustrates another facet of speculative horror represented in the film, the lack of control a black person has over his or her own life, something that will become more of a prominent issue when they reach the Armitage home. One of the people Harris interviewed in his study shared his own father’s advice when getting pulled over: “It doesn’t make a difference [that you did nothing wrong]. Just do what they tell you to do,” therefore reaffirming the fear black people have of the police and being criminalized, and having to be passive to avoid being

incarcerated, beaten, or even killed (41). In this scene, Chris is imagined as the criminal by this officer because he is black, even though he was not behind the wheel. We learn later, however, that the true *horror* of this film is the Armitage family, because behind the mask of all their wealth, class and privilege, they literally get away with the kidnapping and murdering of numerous black people. The Armitage family gets away with the heinous crimes of objectifying black people and black bodies into commodities for their neighbors to buy and trap them within the sunken place to live in a divided identity and life that is primarily controlled by the white individual, while the black victim helplessly watches from below. The concept of the sunken place and hypnosis that characters such as Chris experience, are Peele's worst imaginable fears for a black person coming true, and reveals how they are not entirely imaginary, but belong to a history of experimentation and racist science that was performed on black people for generations.

Peele's strongest use of speculative horror is through his creation of the sunken place and how he imagines the physical entrapment of incarceration, and the psychological effect that these conditions have on black people in prisons. Moreover, the use of hypnosis for "incapacitation" highlights a late 20<sup>th</sup> century shift in the rationale for building more prisons to incarcerate non-violent crimes (such as with the three strikes rule) to ensure formerly-incarcerated individuals (especially black men) never experience true freedom again, and like Chris, are "incapacitated" in this sunken place controlled by those with power over them from the inside and outside.<sup>83</sup> Before I begin my analysis of the first scene with the sunken place, I want to discuss the representation of hypnosis as a tool to "incapacitate" someone like Chris from a bad habit (smoking) and the way this crime is imagined for the Armitage family. Even though Rose's

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<sup>83</sup> The "three strikes" rule was passed in 1994 and according to Gilmore, "the California version includes nonviolent prior convictions among eligible 'strikes,' sets no age, temporal, or jurisdictional limitations on priors, and allows prosecutors to use their power to 'wobble' charges in order to make current misdemeanors into felonies and therefore strikable" (108).

mom, Missy Armitage, is a psychologist, her methods are not meant to rehabilitate as she suggests to Chris. Similarly, the 1980s witnesses a shift from building new prisons for rehabilitation and instead for “incapacitation” as a form of punishment (Gilmore 95). *Get Out* echoes the scenes of hypnosis in *Of One Blood* to show this history of mind control that uses hypnosis as a tool to oppress those victims under its power and change his or her identity. In this film, when hypnosis is applied by Missy it represents the criminalizing of black people for non-violent crimes, and this rationale to build more prisons to effectively punish criminals.

For the Armitage family though, the quality of Chris’s health is an important aspect of his value as a commodity, and this is why he is criminalized for smoking and requires hypnosis to help him stop. They want to ensure his body is in the best health because this hypnosis is part of the Coagula procedure to prepare the body to have a white individual’s brain transplanted into it for total control over mind and body. Peele uses speculative horror to create this imagined scenario that extrapolates from the realities of a black man being wrongly accused, and in this case, it is the fuel for Missy to prey on Chris and punish him. As she stirs her tea cup and asks him to visualize, listen, and revisit his worst memories, he becomes incapacitated and literally paralyzed in his fear. Chris tells her as he grips his armchair with tears running down his face, “I can’t move,” to which she responds, “Just like that day when you did nothing.” When she tells him to “sink,” the camera pans out to a shot completely in darkness with Chris screaming in silent horror as he falls into nothingness, watching Missy fade from above and he falls deeper into this dark abyss (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

This is significant because despite the dramatic music, Chris’s screams are never heard, they are completely muted, and his voice is gone. When the camera quickly returns to the scene outside of the sunken place, Chris is shown as wide-eyed, with tears streaming down his face in

horror.<sup>84</sup> Yet, no sounds escape him and his body appears frozen in time, and she tells him “Now you’re in the sunken place.” Hypnosis is the first part of the Coagula procedure and Chris does not realize how this moment is meant to incapacitate and sedate him so that his body and mind are ready to be overpowered by another just from the clink of the spoon hitting the tea cup. Chris is transformed from a subject to object at this point, and this connects to hooks’s statement that black people get “reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward” (168).

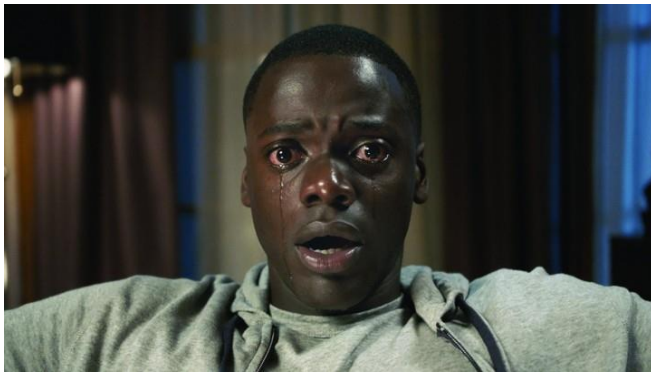


Figure 4.3: Chris paralyzed. *Get Out* (2017).



Figure 4.4: Chris falling into the sunken place. *Get Out* (2017).

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<sup>84</sup> This scene resonates with the many incarcerated black men that as Alexander states are not just locked behind “actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls” and place “people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship,” although in the film, they are not given any sort of agency at all (13).

In a sense, Chris is incapacitated so that he can be experimented on and made into this zombie and Frankenstein's monster-like persona that can be reassembled both in mind and body for a paying customer. As Roane notes, "Peele draws explicitly on the specific (uninterrupted) histories of medical exploitation and radical expendability Black communities have suffered in the development of knowledge, practices, and technologies that save and extend white lives." This scene then becomes the physical and psychological representation that criminalization and mass incarceration have on black people and reinforces the speculative horror that is experienced as *real* and not imaginary. Although Peele imagines hypnosis as the tool, it is no different from the way black people have been incapacitated from their life and freedom when they are incarcerated. Taking this idea further, though, Peele illustrates the value of black bodies as commodities to extend white life and specifically, how white privilege and power has determined the value of black life for generations.

Peele highlights the Armitage family's white privilege and white supremacist ideology to undermine the universalizing *All Lives Matter* claims and show that black lives *are* at risk because in this film black people are imagined as being incapable of living their lives properly and therefore, as needing to be made useful for a white person. In a later scene of *Get Out*, Chris is being prepared for the final stage of the Coagula procedure, transplantation, and is forced to watch a video featuring Roman Armitage, who explains: "You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you've enjoyed your entire life time. With your natural gifts and our determination, we can be part of something great, something perfect." Roman thereby suggests that black people and white people need one another to transcend the limits of humanity in some way; in this case to achieve immortality. Roman's comment suggests that this is a collaboration, rather than a hijacking of the black person's body. The speculative horror of this imagined

divided white and black identity is that the white person will still hold most of the power, and the black person will live in the depths of his or her subconscious, stripped of all autonomy.

This interpretation can also be connected to the context of contemporary society and the *All Lives Matter* versus *Black Lives Matter* movements that appear to oppose one another, specifically because of the perception that saying *Black Lives Matter* is exclusionary. Similarly, Roman's proposition to unite the two identities to create something "perfect" suggests a color-blind mentality that echoes the *All Lives Matter* slogan. In Ashley Atkins's article "*Black Lives Matter* or *All Lives Matter*? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice," she explains that *All Lives Matter* subscribes to a post-racial and color-blindness that does not perceive the "*Black Lives Matter* movement as responding to instances of racial injustice" (2). Roman overlooks this "racial injustice," because he believes that by allowing a white individual to transplant himself or herself into a black person's body, he is "perfecting" the flaws of humanity and mortality in some way. More important though, Roman is determining whose life holds more worth than the other, and this is at the heart of the *All Lives Matters* versus *Black Lives Matter* debates. Atkins comments that *Black Lives Matter* can be interpreted more as an "affirmation" for the "worth of black, not white, lives because the lives that are shown to have worth are white" (8-9). Simply put, Roman believes a black person's life is valuable when it can be used to benefit the extension of white life.

This white supremacist ideology is inevitably passed down to his son Dean Armitage (Rose's father) who challenges Chris's existence by asking, "What is your purpose?" and reinforces white privilege and white supremacist attitudes by asserting, "We are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons." Dean's comment illustrates the intensity of his racist thinking because he believes his whiteness is holy and even aligns himself with the figure of a god that



determines who deserves to live and, in this case, what black person will sacrifice his or her livelihood to allow a white god to live forever. This statement also echoes some of the same ideologies from Doro and his hope for immortal children and god-like power in *Wild Seed*. The speculative horror in this imagined scenario is that it is rooted in the terrible reality that “black lives are continually subject to terror, violence and death” (Fojas 40). Apart from the divine and existential purposes Roman and Dean express to prey on black people to serve white people as their “cocoons” to achieve immortality, they also have a stereotypical and imagined perception that black people possess certain qualities of superior physical strength or sexual performance, and these assets are what render their black victims into valuable commodities to be bought and sold to the highest bidder.

Peele illustrates the speculative horror that a black person has about his or her body and its imagined capabilities, particularly the value of physical strength, which is an indicator of good health and makes a black person with these assets an attractive commodity. Even though Chris is with his girlfriend, Rose, he feels outnumbered by this predominantly white neighborhood and even tells the black maid Georgina, “All I know is if there are too many white people, I get nervous you know?”<sup>85</sup> This statement is important because it is one of the few times that Chris expresses his explicit fear toward white power and domination. Everyone’s keen interest in him is also alarming for him, especially when learning about his strengths or weaknesses. In one scene, Rose’s brother Jeremy observes, “your frame, your genetic makeup, if you really pushed your body, I mean really trained, no pussy footing around, you’d be a fucking beast.” Jeremy even tries to test Chris’s strength by putting him in a chokehold that makes everyone uncomfortable. Even though this is a physical test, it still illustrates the power dynamic

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<sup>85</sup> Georgina is actually Marianne Roman.

between white people and black people. Chris sits tensely trying not to be the “beast” he is imagined to be, and in the eyes of the Armitage family, he is the perfect subject to be tamed and purchased. Jeremy essentially performs an appraisal of Chris’s physical attributes and this foreshadows the events of the next day when the Armitage family invites all the neighborhood friends over for a party. When Chris tells his friend Rod about the odd behavior from everyone around him, Rod reaffirms his fear as a black man being objectified, “They got you on display,” and Chris replies, “It’s like they’ve never seen a black person before.” This brief conversation highlights the strangeness of this party and verifies Rod’s claim that Chris *is* on display for everyone to bid on him. This suggests the speculative horror of an imagined auction where Chris is for sale, yet in this film, Peele makes it the reality of his narrative.

Peele demonstrates the imagined perceptions of a black person’s physical strength through some of the guests who name black athletes that they admire. For example, when Rose introduces Chris to the Greene couple, they declare that, “I do love Tiger” and “Gordon loves Tiger,” and ask to see his form. Not only does this confirm Rod’s theory that Chris is on display, but Chris is also being asked to *prove* how his physical strength can be useful. The reality is that these are all potential buyers that want to know whether Chris is worth the purchase or not. Moreover, Jeremy and the Greene’s comments convey the way they fetishize black people and black bodies. Fojas states that “A fetish stands in for and covers over difference. Difference is terrifying for a hegemonic subject for the way it exposes the lack of the other” and these comments almost suggest a hunger to consume Chris because of the attributes they can gain and absorb from him. Moreover, Fojas explains that “the racial fetish represents an attempt to control difference to manage and overcome it by denying it, thereby protecting against lack and loss of power and control” (41). Thus, the fear of racialized others is “controlled through possession and

through the disavowal of difference” (Fojas 42). Although Chris is confused for most of the scenes I have discussed, the main point of it all is that he is being commodified, objectified, and fetishized in various ways so that these white individuals can imagine if taking over his life is *worth* it. Physical strength, however, is not the only asset they look for, but also sexual performance.

The concept of the pornotrope emerges in Peele’s speculative horror when Chris is also fetishized for his imagined sexual abilities, which is another important aspect of how a black person’s body is “valuable” for a paying customer. Again, almost as though trying to fulfill some sort of appetite, a woman and her husband (who is in a wheelchair) take note of Chris’s physical features. The woman squeezes Chris’s arm (testing out the “merchandise”) and asks Rose, “Is it true? Is it better?” while shifting her eyes down toward Chris’s genitals, imagining his sexual performance if her husband were to take over his body. Chris’s body then signifies the potential sexual pleasure he could give her. Roane explains that “the Armitages and the other families who bid on Chris’s form seek to sublimate his capacities through the pornotropic into the raw material of this sordid economy, flesh.” More than anything else, Chris’s black body, the material flesh of it, is what is most valuable to a potential buyer because it can provide the “cocoon” to extend a white person’s life. Roane notes that “black flesh is discardable” and this highlights another aspect of speculative horror that is being envisioned in Peele’s film. My examples above allude to the twisted white utopian imagination for recreating a master and slave dynamic. This film, however, complicates this by making the white person and the black person share an identity, one that is dominated by the white person, but still has traces of the black person in the subconscious depths of the sunken place.

The Coagula procedure echoes a Frankenstein's monster narrative that reanimates an older white person's life into a young healthy black person's body, and illustrates a divided master/slave identity to achieve the ideal white utopia; this resonates with the struggle for freedom that black people face when they are incarcerated and even after they are released. Roane explains that "slavery as social death, and cinematically he [Peele] examines the intimate gendered colonization of Black bodies that made slavery and its ongoing afterlife possible and generative." The Coagula procedure is how black bodies are regenerated and reanimated into vehicles for white people to enslave and extend their lives: they are their slaves physically and mentally. This totalizing and dehumanizing enslavement is a concept that scholars have spoken about for decades. For example, hooks states that, "whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible" (168). In this case, Peele imagines the erasure and invisibility of black people by making them victims of the Armitage family and trapping them in the sunken place, but at the same time, being visibly black on the outside, even though a white person is in control of the mind and body. The subjectivity of a black person is challenged in *Get Out* because they do suffer a "social death" and their bodies are "colonized" by the white person who takes over, yet they are not entirely gone, but live in the sunken place, deep within their subconscious. The division between the white person and the black person's identities is difficult to identify at first glance, but when Chris speaks to some of the victims, such as Georgina (Marianne Armitage), Walter (Roman Armitage), and Logan (Dre from the beginning of the film), he senses something is off about them. The speculative horror in these scenes lies in the fact that these black people are not themselves. Although on the outside they maybe *appear* black, they are controlled by a white person and there are only brief moments when a part of who they used to be emerges.

Fojas explains that these black people (the victims) have been, “taken over, occupied, coopted and possessed by dead white people. They are the living dead,” which suggests their Frankenstein’s monster and even zombie-like personae when intertwining the white and black identities together (38). One scene I believe strongly represents this dynamic occurs when Chris and Logan are asked about the challenges of being a black man in society. Logan is presented as a soft-spoken man and responds to this question by stating, “For the most part very good. I find it difficult to go in detail because I haven’t wanted to leave. The chores have become my sanctuary.” This statement illustrates the master and slave power dynamic because Logan admits to using this body (which belongs to Dre) to perform labor. In other words, the interest in Chris’s physical assets and sexual performance were important because Logan represents the imagined assumption that a black body is only valuable and useful for physical tasks.

The characters Georgina and Walter are also consistently shown performing physical or domestic labor, and this reinforces the master and slave relationship that the Armitage family and their community seem to desire.<sup>86</sup> But when Chris takes a photo of Logan to send to his friend Rod, there is a shift in Logan’s character. Previously his face had a calm demeanor, and in this moment his eyes widen in horror and blood begins to drip from his nose. The blood suggests that the real person inside, Dre, is fighting to make his oppression and pain seen and acknowledged somehow. Suddenly, Logan jumps on Chris, pulling him aggressively telling him to “GET OUT!” (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6). In this moment, Dre escapes the sunken place and tries to warn Chris about the Armitage family’s horrific plan. More important, though, this scene represents the struggle for freedom, in this case a black person’s freedom, which speaks to some of the problems that Michelle Alexander presents in her work *The New Jim Crow*.

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<sup>86</sup> In Chris’s case, however, he is “purchased” by a blind man who wants his eyes because he recognizes his talents as a photographer and artist.



Figure 4.5: Logan/Dre snapping out of the hypnosis. *Get Out* (2017).

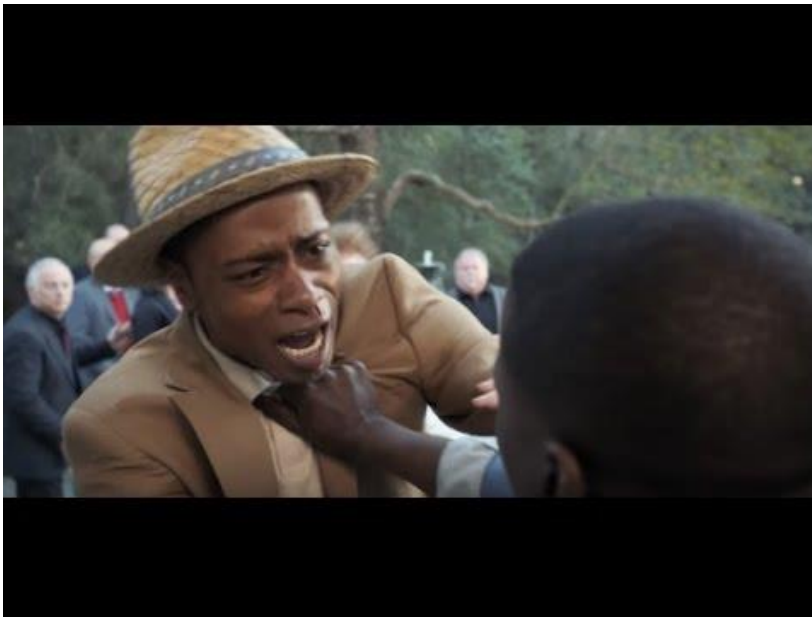


Figure 4.6: Dre's temporary escape from the sunken place to warn Chris. *Get Out* (2017).

First, however, it is important to consider Alexander G. Weheliye argument in *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* that “an articulated assemblage of the human (viscus/flesh) borne of political violence, while at the same time not losing sight of the different ways the law pugnaciously adjudicates who is

deserving of personhood and who is not (habeus)” (11). This is exactly how the Armitages reassembles their black victims, who they feel are not deserving of his or her own personhood anymore and should be controlled by a white person instead. Similarly, black people who are criminalized and incarcerated (and even upon release) are subject to this same prejudice about personhood and prevented from various “freedoms,” such as voting or employment, causing them to return to these systems again and again. Alexander states that, “Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discriminating – employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service – are suddenly legal” (2). Like the Armitages victims trapped in the sunken place, incarcerated individuals are prone to “legalized discrimination” and 80 percent of many African American men possess a criminal record that makes them “part of a growing undercaste, permanently locked up and locked out of mainstream society” (Alexander 7).

While Peele’s film visualizes the speculative horror of a white person hijacking a black person’s body to use for labor while the black person suffers in the sunken place, he is speaking directly to the same issues Alexander brings up about those incarcerated individuals who get forgotten in the system. Their suffering becomes invisible and their struggles seem more imagined than real. In *Get Out*, however, Chris’s friend Rod represents a black man who speaks these truths, but they are interpreted as conspiracies by the authorities and even Chris himself.

Even though Rod is the comic relief of *Get Out*, I argue he adds much more to the film because he shows Peele’s speculative horrors to be realities and moves us toward a critical dystopia that emphasizes the importance of *black lives* and preventing more black people from being taken from the community in the future. When Rod learns that Chris was hypnotized by

Missy, he is suspicious and asks him, “Why aren’t you scared you got hypnotized?” which conveys his mistrust of the situation. While Chris tries to push away his fears, Rod confirms that this is not an imaginary fear but a real threat to Chris, especially when he is “on display” as the only black man. His critiques are often misinterpreted for conspiracy theories and his plea with the authorities to help him convey the lack of concern given for black people and their lives. When Rod goes to the police to report Chris missing, he explains, “I believe they’ve been abducting black people, brainwashing them, making them work for them as sex slaves and shit. I’m not sure if it’s the hypnosis... They already got two brothers we know, and there could be more.” Even though Rod’s statement sounds like it is coming from a fictional horror story, everything he says is true.

Rod moves audiences toward a critical dystopia by asking them to consider this theory, to recognize that these are not imagined scenarios but realities that are extrapolated from the erasure of black people and black lives through criminalization, incarceration and even death. Furthermore, Rod also gestures toward a critical dystopia because the capture of these two black men indicates that there are more lives at stake, specifically black lives, in the future – and something must be done to stop this violent cycle from continuing. Rod’s plea to the authorities, however, are met with ridicule for his outrageous comments. What makes this scene even more problematic is the fact that the main officer he speaks to is a black woman and her denial of Rod’s theory relates to the refusal of *All Lives Matter* proponents to recognize the significance of black lives and the *Black Lives Matter* movement. As Atkins states, “color-blindness directs us to aim to make race an insignificant category in public life; it tells us that race should not matter” (2).



After this encounter, Rod decides to take matters into his own hands and this resonates with black people's distrust of the authorities that are meant to serve and protect them, because the reality is that authorities typically criminalize them (such as the examples from the beginning) or in this case, perceive their fears as imagined. Fortunately, Rod does save Chris at the end of the film and this signifies a critical dystopia because Chris is able to escape and kill the Armitage family (while also killing the enslaved black people there as a sort of sacrifice) and end this twisted cycle for good. When Rod saves Chris, this signifies hope for the possibility that a police authority can value black life by protecting and serving those black people in need, rather than criminalizing and incarcerating them.

Rod and Chris perform a similar mission to that of the *Black Lives Matter* movement because they are both concerned with telling the truth about “what is known by these communities, that it shouldn't have to be told, but when it is, it is told for the epistemic benefit of whites, that it remains, in other words, a resistant form of understanding” (Alexander 18). Thus, speculative horror is useful for extrapolating on the real-world and everyday horrors that black people face by the white power that still exists in much of the fabric of our society and its institutions, especially prisons. In fact, Peele used this ending as an alternate to his original one because of the painful reality that most black people in Chris's situation would face. In the original ending, Chris is found by the police and sentenced to prison for the murder of the Armitage family. Peele explains in the Director's Commentary that he wanted this to be a moment that shows the hopelessness of justice for a black man in the system because as a black person, “you're up against some like Illuminati shit and Chris is a martyr.” Peele changed the ending, however, because with the Trump election and rising racial tensions in the US, he explained that viewers “needed a hero” and this conveys how Peele's film attempts to create a

critical dystopia where the future of black people is more hopeful than the realities they currently face. Ultimately, *Get Out* conveys the horrific reality that black people face every day when trying to navigate their way through multiple channels of institutionalized racism meant to oppress and exploit them.

*Get Out* is a film that uses horror and speculative fiction to convey black people's fear of violent policing, criminalization, commodification, mass incarceration, and exploitation, and shows this by illustrating the real and imagined scenarios that threaten the lives of black people every day. Chris's story is not simply a figment of the imagination, it is in many ways the truth. Peele extrapolates from contemporary issues, particularly with mass incarceration, but also illustrates the power of white people to literally take over the minds and bodies of black people. In an interview with *The New York Times Magazine* Peele stated, "One of the reasons this movie clicked with more than just a black audience is because you get to be black while you're watching it." This statement itself reveals much of the narrative's plot and what it means to be "black," through a hostile takeover and abduction; and what criminalization, exploitation and oppression look like for a black person. In conversation with the other works of speculative fiction in my project, *Of One Blood* and *Wild Seed*, this narrative also addresses issues of racist science, experimentation, and hypnosis, to trace a long history of black people being made invisible or silenced by a dominant power.

For the purposes of this chapter, I focused on the new forms of discrimination and slavery that exist in the form of criminalization and mass incarceration. I highlighted the speculative horror that black people face in the everyday, even with simple tasks like driving, there is always a threat. Moreover, after a black person becomes incarcerated and part of this "system," they become stigmatized and alienated because they "enter a hidden underworld of legalized

discrimination and permanent exclusion” (Alexander 13). The Armitage family’s white utopian imagination operates similarly to mass incarceration today, and its effects in taking over the minds and bodies of black people so that they are never truly free again. As Alexander notes, “mass incarceration is designed to warehouse a population deemed disposable – unnecessary to the functioning of the new global economy” (18). In the nightmarish vision of *Get Out*, black people are not necessarily seen as disposable, but rather valuable for one reason only: extending white life. Thus, the debate about *Black Lives Matter* becomes about how black lives (and black bodies) matter for white people and how they can be used for the benefit of maintaining white power and white supremacy.

Early works such as Derrick Bell’s “The Space Traders” sought to warn black people about body snatching in a science fiction classic and Peele builds on this idea in his film. *Get Out* envisions an alternate future from this speculative horror plotline, and warns black people to “get out” of these colorblind ideologies that are constructed to make everyone believe that we are all “equal” because *All Lives Matter*, and recognize that black people need to be protected in their everyday lives from the persistent criminalization, incarceration, exploitation and oppression they must endure throughout their lifetime. My next section will shift our attention to an analysis of issues I previewed earlier in *The Adventures of Don Chipote*; immigration, virtual reality, and labor, and how they are further complicated and reimaged in Alex Rivera’s film *Sleep Dealer*. The final chapter will explore issues of settler colonialism, displacement, and fulfilling a critical dystopia in Rosaura Sánchez’s and Beatrice Pita’s *Lunar Braceros* 2125-2148.

### Part III: Critical Dystopias in the 21st Century and Beyond

#### Chapter 5: Virtual Labor, Surrogate Humanity, and the Techno-Utopian American Dream in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*

“This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they always wanted: All the work, without the workers.” – *Sleep Dealer*

In the six-minute video “Hyper-Reality” by Keiichi Matsuda, a Mexican woman named Juliana Restrepo navigates a hyper-technological and consumerist future Mexican society comprised of virtual reality.<sup>87</sup> She embodies a transactional identity because the value system of credits and points she receives as a virtual laborer are how she determines her worth as a person. Originally hoping to be a teacher, she is currently employed by an off-shore company called “Job Monkey” (that translates her assignments from Chinese to Spanish) buying groceries and performing other odd jobs to survive. Throughout the video, Juliana obsessively tries to earn more points, but when her virtual identity is compromised and she loses everything, she feels lost about who she is and turns to virtual reality again for guidance.

I begin with this brief synopsis of “Hyper-Reality” because it represents our evolving era of digital and virtual reality technologies. Our social media feeds contribute to a hyper-consumerist culture with subliminal ads and messages to buy more. We talk to our artificial technologies (such as Amazon’s Alexa or Google Home) to tell us the time, weather, set reminders, and more. Getting likes on our Facebook and Instagram posts, or views on YouTube videos have become a new type of currency, and in some cases, is a legitimate way to earn money as an “influencer.”<sup>88</sup> We have adopted this type of transactional identity through our digital personas and there is a fear that this interconnected world may become so virtual that we

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<sup>87</sup>: You can view the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJg02ivYzSs>

<sup>88</sup> According to *Influencer MarketingHub*, an influencer is defined as “an individual who has the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of his/her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his/her audience.” Influencers can be anyone (but are celebrities for the most part) and usually use social media to market products companies are selling.

will no longer need real human interaction and connection. In fact, with a flourishing gig economy and global outsourcing, a lot of the production and labor behind the things we buy are invisible to us.<sup>89</sup> I argue that virtual labor is already becoming the new norm and the “temporary” work that a person does is all part of a thriving neoliberal future that will continue to exploit laborers (like Juliana), especially those from different countries.

In this chapter, I emphasize the transactional and invisible characteristics of virtual labor as imagined for Mexican immigrants in Alex Rivera’s film *Sleep Dealer* (2009). I argue that this film demonstrates a future where the American Dream has reached its peak of a capitalist techno-utopia through the creation of virtual labor that does more than extract physical labor from its subjects; it is also a type of affective labor and surrogate humanity that takes life-giving energy from humans.<sup>90</sup> In this dystopian “near-future,” I suggest that this mythical interconnected global economy that comprises this new “American Dream” dehumanizes all characters in this narrative who “get connected,” such as the protagonist Memo Cruz, whose virtual self is literally materialized into an object (robot); Luz who manipulates memories and stories for profit (both of which are determined and controlled by artificial technology); and a Chicano soldier named Rudy who kills others with drone technology to protect US interests at the border (specifically the water they have privatized) and performs these acts on a

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<sup>89</sup> According to Dr. Emilia Istrate and Jonathan Harris on *National Association of Counties*, “The gig economy is made up of three main components: the independent workers paid by the gig (i.e., a task or a project) as opposed to those workers who receive a salary or hourly wage; the consumers who need a specific service, for example, a ride to their next destination, or a particular item delivered; and the companies that connect the worker to the consumer in a direct manner, including app-based technology platforms. Companies such as Uber, Airbnb, Lyft, Etsy or TaskRabbit act as the medium through which the worker is connected to – and ultimately paid by – the consumer. These companies make it easier for workers to find a quick, temporary job (i.e., a gig), which can include any kind of work, from a musical performance to fixing a leaky faucet. One of the main differences between a gig and traditional work arrangements, however, is that a gig is a temporary work engagement, and the worker is paid only for that specific job.”

<sup>90</sup> I am referring to key concepts from Kalindi Vora’s *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* and Vora and Neda Atanasoski’s article “Surrogate Humanity: Posthuman Networks and the (Racialized) Obsolescence of Labor), which I will discuss in more detail below.

sensationalized reality television show called DRONES.<sup>91</sup> This analysis of *Sleep Dealer* builds from my earlier chapter on *The Adventures of Don Chipote* to explore how immigration, labor and virtual reality impact Mexican immigrants in this more traditional science fiction landscape, and Alex Rivera's projections of the future in a post-9/11 world that echoes the economic depression and xenophobia we previewed earlier with Venegas's novel in the 1920s and 1930s. While I conclude that a critical dystopia is more fully-formed in this narrative than the other ones, I argue it does not reach its full potential since the enclave of resistance that is created quickly disbands after one revolutionary action, halting other possibilities for collective activism and change.

When *Sleep Dealer* was first released in 2009, *The New York Times* reviewed it as a thought-provoking film that used “speculative energy of the genre [science fiction] to explore some troubling and complex contemporary issues.” The review provided interesting details about this independent film but seemed to fixate on its use of low-budget special effects that produced a plot that was a “bit thin.” Even though *Sleep Dealer* played at various festivals with impressive reviews, it did not achieve the full acclaim one would have hoped, nor the amount of theatergoers to keep the conversation about it going (as did Jordan Peele's *Get Out*). To make matters worse, the film's distributor went out of business and it never got its proper commercial release. According to an article in *The Washington Post*, Rivera explains that, “It's been the pirates and the professors who have kept this film alive for the last half-decade.”

Rivera, however, a Peruvian-American activist from New York, has been creating films and projects like *Sleep Dealer* for years. He released an experimental film called *Why Cybraceros?* in 1997 to show “the hi-tech face of the age-old American Dream,” which clearly

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<sup>91</sup> I use “near future” in reference to the promotional trailer for *Sleep Dealer*.

resonates with many of the themes and issues we see in the full-length dystopian future of *Sleep Dealer*.<sup>92</sup> Despite the struggles to get *Sleep Dealer* circulating, as Rivera explained, this film was a fascinating topic for academics and students worldwide. Scholars such as Lysa Rivera, Luis Martín-Cabrera, B.V. Olgún, and many more have engaged with various topics of colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and politics that this film generates. As Lysa Rivera states in her article “Future Histories and Cyborg Labor: Reading Borderlands Science Fiction after NAFTA,” *Sleep Dealer* was an excellent illumination of the present to expose “multinational capitalism’s presence in the everyday lives of *fronterizo* workers whose very livelihood is problematically reliant upon – yet alienated by – the new global (multinational) economy.” Scholars such as Amy Sara Carroll and China Medel also discuss other aspects of the film, such as the function of using a documentary style and the biopolitics of memory. My analysis refers to, departs from, and builds on some of this scholarship to emphasize *Sleep Dealer*’s take on virtual labor, affective labor, surrogate humanity, and the possibility for a critical dystopia. Since *Sleep Dealer* was re-released commercially on major platforms in 2014, and in the midst of Rivera’s own participation in other projects, such as his collaboration on the music video for La Santa Cecilia’s “ICE/EL HIELO,” his work will inevitably continue to generate conversations about the future of labor, technology, and immigration.

I have already defined my key words for transactional identity and virtual reality in my chapter on *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, but I would like to provide more context for the keywords and concepts that I use in *Sleep Dealer*. First, I want to distinguish virtual reality from virtual labor. In this chapter, I focus on virtual labor as a core keyword for my argument and consider its dehumanizing effects on the physical body, mind and memory. My concept of virtual

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<sup>92</sup> This promotional film was inspired by the “real promotional film produced in the 1950’s by the California Grower’s Council, titled ‘Why Braceros?’”

labor emerges from the invisible work and production that happens in an interconnected virtual network that employs temporary workers from all over the world, and in the case of *Sleep Dealer*, those characters who get “nodes” installed to permanently augment their bodies and “get connected.” Moreover, virtual laborers like Memo, or what I refer to as virtual *braceros*, are the most vulnerable because sleep dealer factories seek to take all physical and mental life energy from them, sometimes even killing them or making them go blind.<sup>93</sup> Virtual reality, in this case, is no longer used as an “escape” or an “imagined” place, but a tool to make human labor entirely invisible and seemingly non-existent because it is *virtual*, and therefore easily expendable.<sup>94</sup> I further develop and support this concept of virtual labor by including Kalindi Vora’s concept of “affective labor” from *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor* and “surrogate humanity” from Vora and Neda Atanasoski’s article entitled, “Surrogate Humanity: Posthuman Networks and the (Racialized) Obsolescence of Labor.” In Vora’s *Life Support*, she identifies our current system as a global outsourcing and biocapital economy where “Tracking affective and biological production in outsourcing as vital energy opens up possibilities that attending to labor alone may not” (13).

Vora defines affective and surrogate labor as a “vital energy” and believes this should be what is tracked (rather than value):

...as the content of what is produced and transmitted between biological and affective producers and their consumers holds on to the human vitality that Karl Marx describes as true content of value carried by the commodity and the absolute use-value of labor power to capitalist production, while maintaining the argument that what is produced by these activities exceeds what is recognizable in the commodity’s exchange value. (Vora 13)

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<sup>93</sup> I discuss the connection between sleep dealer factories and *maquiladoras* in the next section. Although many scholars refer to them as “cybraceros,” I wanted to emphasize the function of the “virtual” aspects of virtual reality (as opposed to a cyborg) as it is used in the context of this film.

<sup>94</sup> In this case, the word “virtual” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “That which is virtual rather than actual or real; (now) spec. that which is simulated by computer technology, virtual reality” to emphasize how humanity and labor are no longer perceived as “real” in this future (“Virtual,” Def. 2)



Additionally, in Vora's and Atanasoski's article, they define surrogate humanity as the "technologized posthuman stand-in, a rich experimental subject/object" that also addresses the "processes through which racialized, gendered, and sexualized spheres of life and labor are seemingly elided by technological surrogates, even as these spheres are replicated in emergent modes of work, violence, and economies of desire" (3). For my analysis, I analyze how virtual labor uses affective labor and surrogate humanity in *Sleep Dealer* to make capitalist production invisible (even though it still exists) and dehumanize and deteriorate the virtual laborers' livelihoods both physically and mentally. The characters in *Sleep Dealer* not only perform the labor or produce the commodity, but also *become* the commodities themselves as a consequence of participating in a virtual labor that does not recognize their humanity to begin with. Building from Vora's concept of affective and surrogate labor, I argue that *Sleep Dealer* illustrates how this futuristic global and biocapitalist economy exceeds the commodity's exchange value (in this case the human laborers) by literally sucking the vital life energy from them, discarding them, and continuing to replace them as objects with new virtual laborers. As a result, they embody the idea of surrogate humanity because their vital energies are all used up and then easily replaced by another human/virtual laborer.

This brings me to my next key concept "techno-utopia" from Atanasoski's and Vora's article, which refers to the overarching goal of virtual labor practices to achieve a capitalist utopia, but more specifically a techno-utopia. Atanasoski and Vora define this concept in the following ways:

Techno-utopics surrounding big data, smart objects, and internetworking of humans and machines, however, do not dwell in the vitality of matter, but rather propose the thing as a surrogate human. In this way, they replicate the violent neoliberal impetus to enfold difference into sameness—into a shared space and time. (16)

*Sleep Dealer* makes this concept of techno-utopia a reality for US government and capitalist interests by developing technologies (nodes) for people to get surgically installed, and by creating sleep dealer factories along the border (like *maquiladoras*) to prevent illegal immigration from occurring.<sup>95</sup> In this narrative, a techno-utopia is achieved because those who choose to get connected into the global network then become the type of surrogate human as portrayed by Atanasoski and Vora, that performs the invisible virtual labor. Moreover, “The replaceability of human labor with the surrogate human as enchanted object is contextualized by capitalist development in the global north, in which the specter of unemployment is only attached to those populations not already marked for elimination or surplus” (Atanasoski and Vora 16). The techno-utopia achieved by virtual labor is further problematized by the fact that artificial intelligence is the primary source of control over human laborers (such as the direct biological connection that can manipulate memories that will be profitable stories to sell). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, artificial intelligence is defined as “The capacity of computers or other machines to exhibit or simulate intelligent behavior” (“Artificial Intelligence,” Def.1). I use artificial intelligence in my analysis as well to move beyond just thinking about machines or computers that exhibit or simulate intelligent behavior, but to focus on the *human* behavior meant to replace marginalized communities (like immigrants of color) by controlling them, using up all their vital energies through virtual labor, and eventually discarding them when they are no longer useful.

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<sup>95</sup> In Mexico, a *maquiladora* or *maquila* is a “Mexican assembly plant that imports materials and equipment on a duty-free and tariff-free basis. *Maquiladoras* receive raw materials from companies in the U.S. to assemble and export back as finished products. *Maquiladoras* are generally owned by U.S. companies that are incentivized to build *maquilas* in Mexican border towns in return for low-cost labor and savings.” For an interesting documentary on *maquiladoras*, I would recommend *Maquilapolis* (2006) directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre. Filmed in Tijuana, Baja California this documentary focuses on the factories on the U.S.-Mexican border.

In *Sleep Dealer*, I argue that artificial intelligence is used in the ways humans fear most, specifically in relation to the Freudian concept of the “uncanny valley.” In Lydia Liu’s *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious*, she states that the uncanny valley is the idea that as robots become more human-like they provoke more negative feelings within us and evoke questions about what makes human beings unique (240). In this capitalist techno-utopia imagined by Rivera, the reality is that those robots and machines are perceived as being more human than the actual humans they see as less valuable, or not human at all, like people of color and immigrants of color. Other factors such as surveillance, xenophobia, and extreme militarism also play a large part in this future techno-utopia and represent how the residual effects of 9/11 shaped a world that seeks to erase entire communities by placing them into a virtual space, while simultaneously benefiting from their cheap labor. Ultimately, I use these keywords and concepts to frame my argument of *Sleep Dealer*’s version of the American Dream that continues a legacy of exploitation of immigrants of color, especially from Mexico. These new virtual labor practices strip immigrants of color of their humanity and vital biological energies to uphold a capitalist and techno-utopia where immigrants of color no longer exist, yet the world can still benefit from the outsourced cheap labor they provide because now their presence has been made entirely invisible.

In *Sleep Dealer*, the American Dream is still portrayed as the mythical solution to prosperity and escape for poor Mexican farmers like Memo, although anyone who engages with the US’s new virtual labor practices are dehumanized and transformed by the real-world consequences that their labor has on making themselves a transaction, as well as others they engage with (such as Luz who sells other people’s memories). I want to provide a brief profile on three characters from this film: Memo, Luz and Rudy, because they embody the American

Dream or US values of patriotism in different ways that influence their decisions to be virtual laborers. Memo is the primary protagonist of the film and shares a similar background to Don Chipote's character. He is also a poor farmer who dreams of escaping poverty and the mundane tasks of his life in the desert of Santa Ana, Mexico. He believes the only way he can access the American Dream, primarily to provide for his family after his father is killed, is to "get connected" as a virtual laborer along the border. As mentioned earlier, the sleep dealer factories that populate the border echo the *maquiladoras* there today, which employ many young people (especially women) as cheap laborers to provide the necessary production for US corporations. Even though the film focuses on virtual labor, the human body is still necessary, as Atanasoski and Vora explain: "human labor-power continues to be an irreplaceable commodity, highlighting the growing unevenness between racialized, gendered, and ostensibly endlessly exploitable populations who labor in places like China, India, and Mexico" (20). Memo learns of the real-world consequences of obtaining this dream when he begins to lose his grip on reality and his physical and mental state deteriorate. His virtual labor's transactional nature subjects him to almost complete dehumanization since his life energies are transferred into a robot meant to represent him and perform his physical labor. Other virtual laborers like Luz, on the other hand, are trying to make money to pay an unsurmountable student debt accrued after studying to be a writer.<sup>96</sup>

While Luz's job is perceived as less labor-intensive (even though it is virtual) than Memo's, her engagement in this work is unique because she subjects herself to the total control

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<sup>96</sup> Luz's story can be seen as a direct critique of the student loan crisis and recent graduates' inability to escape poverty because of large amount of debt and lack of stable employment. According to *Business Insider*, the average amount of a student's loan is \$29,800 and the national total is over \$1.5 trillion. Considering this crisis, democratic presidential candidates such as Elizabeth Warren are promising to eliminate student debt and provide universal education.

of the artificial intelligence program TruNode. TruNode is a program where Luz shares and sells her memories and stories to people online. Ironically, Luz's formal education, a major symbol of achieving the American Dream, is overshadowed by the debt she had to take on to get her degree and her struggles to survive. Luz faces the consequences of her virtual labor when she discovers that the artificial intelligence program TruNode has convinced her she must get a profitable story no matter what it takes. As a result, Luz's human connection becomes a transaction (in this case with Memo) and she uses both friendship and sex to get the information she needs so that she can sell it as a story to others. She is dehumanized by TruNode by trading in a true human connection for more money.

The final character, Rudy, is a Chicano man who works for the US military and feels he has achieved the American Dream by following his family's long history of patriotism and service to the military. Rudy performs his virtual labor by operating a weaponized drone to patrol the US-Mexico border and other Mexican cities, specifically a dam in Oaxaca, Mexico that contains the water that the US has privatized, from "aqua-terrorists."<sup>97</sup> Rudy uses his transactional identity to commit violence on behalf of US patriotism, but also for a reality television show called DRONES that glamorizes the hunting and killing of foreign threats. Rudy is dehumanized because he is solely seen as a tool, specifically a weapon, and he realizes the error of his patriotism when he kills an innocent man: Memo's father.

I wanted to provide these discussions of the three main characters because they represent the complexities of the American Dream from various perspectives and more important, shed light on post 9/11 sentiments and actions. In Memo's case, he represents the fear of foreigners

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<sup>97</sup> *Sleep Dealer* uses the term "aqua-terrorists" to represent the insurgent groups, such as the Mayan Army of Water Liberation, along the US-Mexico border that seek to destroy this dam and give the water back to the Mexican people.

entering the US and the stereotypes about Mexican immigrants that have only been exacerbated in the current presidential administration.<sup>98</sup> Luz represents the crippling effects of student loan debt and the lengths some people will go in order to eliminate it, even if that means sacrificing friendships and real human connection. Finally, Rudy represents the increased militarism and surveillance for terrorist attacks post 9/11, that resulted in the criminalizing of many innocent people abroad and in the US, especially Muslim communities.<sup>99</sup> Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* imagines a "near-future," that is arguably our present reality, and holds a lot of truths about what has happened since 9/11. In the following analysis, I address the consequences of virtual labor and adopting a transactional identity for these three characters, and how they grapple with a deteriorating humanity and try to organize and reach some sort of critical dystopia in the end.

Virtual labor begins its dehumanizing process when people decide to "get connected" and augment their physical and biological body in a violent transaction between machinery and technology. Like Don Chipote's own experience injuring his foot on the railroad track and forcefully combining himself with industrial technology, the characters in *Sleep Dealer* undergo a surgical procedure and transaction that injects metal holes into their arms so that they can get nodes and connect their nervous system directly to the global network. The way getting nodes is represented on television versus the reality for a poor farmer like Memo is vastly different and dangerous. In one scene, Memo sees a television commercial that asks, "Are your nodes dirty?" to suggest the procedure itself is safe, clean, and a simple gateway to the American Dream.

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<sup>98</sup> During Donald Trump's presidential campaign, he infamously stated, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best...They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

<sup>99</sup> Neda Atanasoski states in *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity*, "Muslims are a new racial group within the United States, since systems of belief and entire social worlds, rather than just individual bodies, are racialized to uphold U.S. militarism in the Middle East" (13). Atanasoski also notes, "U.S. militarism itself functioned as a racializing technology, justifying the nations interventionism in the name of a global struggle against imperial racial domination" (22).

Memo's reality, however, is that his "nodes job" will have to be more violent and dangerous because it must be done illegally. Memo's journey to get connected is symbolic of many Mexican immigrants forced to cross the border illegally in pursuit of a better life, and this typically requires the help of a Coyote, or in this case, the help of a Coyotek.

Memo receives his nodes job from Luz and this is one of the most graphic and powerful scenes of the entire film because it illustrates the intensity of making the transformation and connection into the global network.<sup>100</sup> Rivera employs biopolitical aesthetics in this scene to accentuate Memo's body being transformed both from an external perspective, as well as at an internal and biological level. Memo's humanity begins deteriorating as soon as he chooses to have this procedure because he gives up his free will to become a surrogate human that represents the commodified and objectified laborer needed to support the utopian American dream of an invisible virtual labor force.<sup>101</sup> In the scene when his nodes are being installed, Luz tells him that the "electricity will fill his nodes," and the camera zooms onto how the metal not only breaks the surface of his skin (with blood) but also turns it blue as it fuses with his nervous system and the technological network. His red blood is contrasted with the blue technology being installed into his nervous system (see Figure 5.1). Luz warns Memo about this new two-way connection, specifically that the connection is not always stable, and that the machine may end up controlling the individual connected to it. Luz's comment is seemingly critical of the transaction or "two-way connection" and the artificial intelligence control over oneself as a result of this procedure, yet she does not try to change the consequences of it, but is complicit with it,

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<sup>100</sup> Luz gives Memo this nodes job with the purpose of getting more information out of him. For her, it is one of many transactions she makes with him. Also, even though she is a writer, she learned how to install nodes from an ex-boyfriend who was a Coyotek.

<sup>101</sup> Atanasoski and Vora assert that, "Fantasies of a networked world in which automation, programmability, and data engender unprecedented freedom in fact reproduce, and perhaps even expand, the sphere of devalued labor, transposing categories of abjection from the human into the very infrastructure upon which the techno-utopic future depends," and in this case what the American Dream for a techno-utopia depends on (25).

especially as a Coyotek who directly participates in changing others.

In this scene, Memo's arms, forearms, and shoulders are also shown being injected with a metal spike to make the holes in his body for the nodes. The parts of his body being augmented are all connected to his arms and this is symbolic of the term *brazos*, which translates into arms in Spanish, but also the *braceros* from the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, this procedure permanently marks Memo's body as a virtual laborer because the metal holes in his body are visible and he has adopted the identity of a virtual *bracero* ready for work. The changes inside of Memo, on the other hand, suggest the type of affective and surrogate labor he will perform because his biological nervous system is shown fusing with the technological network. With the procedure complete, Memo feels that he is on his way to achieving the American Dream and proudly declares that he is now connected to the global economy.



Figure 5.1: Luz installing Memo's nodes. *Sleep Dealer* (2009).

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<sup>102</sup> This refers to the Bracero Program during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. According to the *Bracero History Archive* this program, “grew out of a series of bi-lateral agreements between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on, short-term, primarily agricultural labor contracts. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million contracts were signed, with many individuals returning several times on different contracts, making it the largest U.S. contract labor program.”



Despite the dehumanizing process Memo endures, he believes his nodes are a sign of empowerment and mobility. Memo does not realize the transaction he has made has commodified his body and mind as a surrogate human so that the corporations that employ him can control and eventually discard him when he is no longer seen as useful to their production. In the eyes of the sleep dealer factory employers, a virtual laborer is invisible, his or her humanity no longer exists, and they are grouped into this network where their labor is transferred into robotic objects that perform the labor.<sup>103</sup> I will discuss Memo's role as a virtual *bracero* at length in another section. I want to shift our focus now, to affective labor and artificial intelligence used by other types of virtual laborers, such as Luz, who rely on it to manipulate her memories into profitable stories.

Luz uses the program TruNode as an online archive for memories and stories that are valued by an artificial intelligence's judgement and demonstrates a hyper-capitalist market where even memories and human relationships can be bought and sold. Artificial intelligence has three different types of machine systems, ranging from the basic level to the advanced one that TruNode exhibits in this film. According to an article on *Medium*, the three types of artificial intelligence are: Artificial Narrow Intelligence (known for speech recognition, such as Amazon's Alexa), Artificial General Intelligence (can do tasks and learn to improve itself) and finally, Artificial Super Intelligence which is meant to surpass human intelligence entirely.<sup>104</sup> In this case, TruNode operates as an artificial super intelligence with human-like capabilities that can

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<sup>103</sup> Atanasoski and Vora state, "The disappearance and subsumption of human bodies and their reemergence in and through the informational milieu as transparent commodities can thus be understood as racialized not in the sense that only black, brown, or Asian bodies perform the degraded tasks; rather, the transparency of the commodity as dull or dirty labor is racialized in the ways in which it affirms a particular notion of human freedom, leisure, and happiness emerging from imperial modes of liberal governance" (28).

<sup>104</sup> The real-life "humanoid robot" named Sophia can be considered part of the Artificial General Intelligence. Films such as *Ex Machina* (2014), however, portray the Artificial Super Intelligent being like Ava, who successfully manipulates her creators and escapes imprisonment to live a normal human life.

revise one's memories or stories so that they will align with the wants and needs of consumers.

TruNode acts as the mediator between Luz and her customers, and this eliminates the true human connection that is typically gained through storytelling and archival discovery – everything is simply a transaction.

While I agree with China Medel's observation that "the spectral labor of the sleep dealers render laboring bodies invisible, these bodies reappear in TruNode," I argue this is problematized by the fact that Luz uses TruNode to advertise these people and their stories for capital gain (123). Luz is a struggling writer at first, but when someone online pays her to find out more information about her new friend, Memo, she capitalizes on this opportunity to make a profit off another person's memories. Her decision to use Memo in this way illustrates how her virtual labor has already dehumanized her by reducing her relationship with Memo to simply a character in a story she has created, rather than the true connection they could have in real life. The affective labor that Luz performs in giving the vital energy of human memories also alienates her, and according to Vora, "The object produced by alienated activity is invested with one's vital energy, yet leaves the immediate world of the person who produces it" (59). In this way, Luz is already functioning like a cold, emotionless artificial intelligence type of technology and only formulates the connections she needs to create a desirable story. The name of her TruNode profile "*El otro lado del muro*" translates to "the other side of the wall," and this suggests her commitment to grounding her narratives in the struggles at the US-Mexico border. Even though Memo embodies the spirit of what her TruNode stories are supposed to represent, Luz is more concerned with making his memories into digital artifacts for consumption. In fact, Luz is willing to transform into any and all the identities she needs to so that she can gain Memo's trust and access more details from his past. She acts as a friend, Coyotek, and even a

lover, sacrificing all possibilities for true human connection in favor of gaining a story that her artificial intelligence program will approve of and sell online.<sup>105</sup>

When Luz is using her artificial intelligence program TruNode, these scenes reveal the complexities of virtual and affective labor, and specifically the control it has over one's mind that effectively reduces a person's memories into something that is no longer inherently human, but a façade of human memory. Luz's connections to the global network are much more intimate since she can work from the comfort of her own home, rather than a sleep dealer factory, but the premise of contributing to a capitalist culture remains. Like the call center employees or surrogates in India that Vora discusses in *Life Support*, Luz is also "transferring human vital energy directly to a consumer" and showing how affective labor "mediate[s], produce[s], and circulate[s] commodities such as attention, concern, and human communication" in this case, commodified memories (39, 45). In the scene after meeting Memo, Luz writes about him and compares him to other migrants she has met with "nothing but dreams," and therefore, already distances herself from who he is as an individual. When Luz closes her eyes in recollection of their meeting, Memo's face appears on her computer screen and her biological connection with TruNode shows how it can materialize memory onto this digital platform (see Figure 5.2). TruNode plays an active role in transferring Luz's memories because as she tells her story it interrupts her to stop recording and "tell the truth."

This is a significant intervention because the artificial intelligence aspect of TruNode is revising her memories to what they believe is the "truth" she should tell her potential buyers online. In Carroll's article, she explains that, "TruNode corrects text on the basis of affect, demanding transparent truths, a facsimile of documentary, versus the vagrancies of an

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<sup>105</sup> There are actual "antique diary collectors" who sell/buy strangers diaries from eBay and review it on their YouTube channel. Example: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGCJ\\_xBuwbs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGCJ_xBuwbs)

undocumentary poetics – what Luz in the most generous reading of her character embodies” (495). In this way, TruNode appears to understand affect and human memories more than a human like Luz does, and this dehumanizes her further since she has no ownership over her own memories or human relationships. Moreover, in a different scene Luz explains to a friend how the program works in a way where “you can’t lie to the machine,” to signify her acceptance of its control over her. While her language suggests a distancing from herself as a human and TruNode as a “machine,” the truth is that they work in conjunction and often times, the machine” is the one in control. As a result, Luz is pushed further into a transactional identity that is fabricated with the façade of human memories because TruNode has the final say in the way human life should be portrayed, and this persuades Luz to change her identity for Memo so that she can get what she needs from him.



Figure 5.2: Luz using TruNode. *Sleep Dealer* (2009).

Luz changes her identity multiple times to gain Memo’s trust, but as his Coyotek she

develops the first transaction between them, causing him to feel that he owes her for helping him get connected. Luz first befriends Memo and eventually turns their relationship into a transaction when she agrees to be his Coyotek and gives him nodes to get connected. She decides to do this after her initial story on TruNode about Memo is bought by someone who contracts her to get more information about him. Luz's offer to help Memo as his Coyotek is received as a sign of friendship (since she does it for free), yet in most circumstances the relationship between an immigrant trying to cross the border (or in this case get connected) with a Coyote (Coyotek) is purely a transactional one. This moment highlights Luz's true intentions to subconsciously make Memo believe he owes her for helping him get connected, and as a result, a series of transactions with him emerge as she uses his memories to make money. Luz's detachment from humanity as a result of her own virtual labor is then inherited by Memo when she agrees to give him nodes and subject him to the same dehumanization. By inserting these nodes into his body, she begins the process of objectifying and dehumanizing him into both machine (technology) and human, just as TruNode has done to her. Luz and Memo become absorbed into and controlled by these networks and Luz exemplifies how it empties one of his or her own humanity by using affective labor to develop friendships based on a transaction between an immigrant and Coyotek.

Even though Luz initially develops a transaction between herself and Memo as his Coyotek, she also uses sex as a form of power, and affective labor to get him to confess his deepest secrets to her, and this demonstrates how Luz will even commodify her own body to gain a profitable story for TruNode. When Luz and Memo have sex, the intensity of this connection is illustrated not just as a physical act, but as a biological one when they connect their nodes to one another. Vora states in *Life Support* that the "use-value of affective commodities, complex and multiple, can engage discrete realms of imagination and desire that are

simultaneous yet conflicting and contradictory,” and in Luz’s case, her use of affective labor to produce commodified memories in this scene is contradictory with the human connection produced by having sex with Memo (53). With their nodes, they can immerse themselves completely into one another and this is represented through the memories that appear on the screen. Luz convinces Memo to open himself up to her in this way by explaining that the connection with their nodes will allow him to know her past and memories. Even though a flash of a memory appears (supposedly Luz’s), she is unreliable since TruNode manipulates her memories.

Medel asserts that, “Memory images become a way of transgressing the borders blocking social relation and solidarity. They allow us to ‘see’ and feel one another,” and while Luz and Memo *do* totally immerse themselves in one another, I argue it actually causes a rupture in their relationship because Luz only wants “solidarity” and “social relation” for the financial benefits (124). This suggests that Luz may only be showing Memo the façade of human memories, and not genuine ones. More important though, Luz is using affective labor to exchange her own body and mind so that Memo will feel he is participating in something intimate and romantic. After this happens, Luz learns about Memo’s painful past and the death of his father. Luz sells this memory as the final memory from Memo to her mystery buyer, and this signifies her shift from a passive machine to a critical living human being. On the other hand, since Memo has nothing else left to give her, this may also suggest that she is no longer blinded by the possible profit of his memories and can see him as the human being he is. Luz finally seems to be critical of the transactions she has performed on behalf of TruNode and the way she used Memo as nothing more than an object. When he learns about the type of virtual labor she engages in and how she sells his memories, he asks her, “Someone pays you to talk to me?” and this is when he realizes

that they never had a true connection; he was simply a means to an end. Luz's virtual labor dehumanized her so much that she lost control over her memories, her ability to form human connection, and her lack of empathy when selling someone else's intimate memories of their lives for profit. Luz tries to form a critical dystopia, however, with Memo and Rudy when they join forces toward the end of the film.<sup>106</sup> While Luz's virtual labor as a writer urged her to use Memo (and others) in this way, other characters like Rudy use virtual labor in a way that completely dehumanizes and objectifies self and others, seeing them as weapons or targets for entertainment, violence, and even death.

Rudy's virtual labor as a US soldier illustrates the way the *virtual* is not always invisible and reveals the realities of state-sanctioned military violence to maintain a capitalist technoutopia and privatization over resources by targeting aqua-terrorists at the US-Mexico border. *Sleep Dealer* resonates with US politics post-9/11 and casts into relief how immigration and labor policies have changed since the film's release in 2009, especially with the military. On the morning of the September 11, 2001 attacks, President George W. Bush delivered a speech to the nation stating, "This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time." With this call for united action against an external enemy, US political and military agendas changed forever in the fight against terrorism and the strengthening of national security. As a result, thousands of Muslim US citizens faced extreme Islamophobia, violence, surveillance, and discrimination because of who they were and how the media represented them. This watershed moment propelled the US into a political campaign of anti-terrorism and xenophobia. Not only

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<sup>106</sup> Medel's analysis that "Luz's feminized and affective authorial labor positions memory itself as the labor needed to shift relational connections away from the hetero- dyad to the insurgent, collaborative triad — or, put another way, from romantic to political love" rings true in the sense that Memo's final memory is what catalyzes the critical dystopia that emerges and what Medel states is the "political love" she then expresses to Memo (130).

were Muslims targeted, but also any other foreigners coming into the US, especially Mexicans. Consequently, the US-Mexico border became even more of a militarized war zone where the state claimed it had to protect its borders from the threat of illegal aliens and Mexican drug cartels.

Curtis Marez explains in *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* that “The history of marijuana criminalization indicates the close relationship between state and capitalist methods for controlling Mexican workingmen. In each context, Mexicans were constructed as valuable, yet volatile, concentrations of physical force that had to be disciplined and regulated” (132). In fact, the stigma that Mexican immigrants coming in with drugs face has increased over the years after 9/11, adding more fire to the xenophobic tirades about them in our present day. In Rivera’s imagined future, the US has privatized water in a dam in Oaxaca, Mexico, and requires Mexicans to pay for it, which is especially difficult for poor farmers like Memo’s father.<sup>107</sup> Those who try to steal this water or attack the dam are deemed aqua-terrorists. This naming of these actions as aqua-terrorism justifies intense military surveillance at the dam where the water can be bought and as a result, populates the region with military drones that patrol the area, and attempts to completely remove the human element of committing violence and murders toward these “enemies” since these acts are being committed by an “object.” But these drones are remote controlled by a human through virtual labor and are more than just an object or robot; they are a weapon to hurt and kill others. Rudy’s character straddles two competing identities as both Mexican and US American. His loyalty, however, is tested as a US soldier that must protect

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<sup>107</sup> This resonates with the issues of water privatization in Bolivia. According to *NACLA*, “The water and sewer system of El Alto was privatized to Aguas del Illimani in July 1997 when the World Bank made water privatization a condition of a loan to the Bolivian government” and in 2007, the Federation of Neighborhood Associations (FEJUVE) organized a strike the pending construction of water and sewer services that would be out of reach to most of El Alto.



his country at all costs, and this sometimes involves harming vulnerable people in Mexico who have his shared ancestral past. His virtual labor as a drone soldier dehumanizes him more than Luz and Memo because he is the embodiment of a surrogate human used to kill others in a transaction that he has made with the US government, as well as for the entertainment of the viewers that watch a reality show called DRONES.<sup>108</sup>

The reality television show called DRONES glamorizes the virtual labor Rudy performs as a soldier and makes the violence he commits invisible by portraying him as a surrogate human drone and patriotic hero that is engaging in a type of game, rather than threatening the real places and killing people that are targeted in his missions. DRONES represents how the media sensationalizes stories and in the current era of reality television, enacts those real-time moments for audiences to find amusement from. People are more desensitized than ever by the violent images they see on screen because they are just “virtual” and the *reality* does not come across as strongly as it could.<sup>109</sup> The show DRONES normalizes violence and portrays these military missions as an action-packed movie to “blow the hell out of the bad guy!” so that the audience does not feel they are witnessing true violence. Like Luz and Memo, Rudy also has a biological and physical connection through his nodes, yet he is controlled by the military orders he receives and must perform accordingly, or he will be perceived as a terrorist himself. Rudy struggles with being dehumanized as a surrogate human with this drone technology because he must choose between doing what is morally right, or simply following the orders he is given, even if it means killing the innocent.

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<sup>108</sup> B.V. Olgún explains in *Altermundos* that Rudy’s role as a drone soldier is to convey the, “transtemporal depictions of the technologically mediated soldier body [and] raise serious questions about whether the machine is inherently violent, and whether it can be reclaimed and transformed into something other than violence” (134).

<sup>109</sup> I define desensitization according to the *Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology* that defines it as, “the reduction of cognitive, emotional, physiological, and ultimately behavioral response to a stimulus,” and in the case of DRONES, generates excitement from audiences when the drone soldier is violent and does not feel empathy to those killed in the process.

Rudy's virtual labor as a surrogate human drone suggests his dehumanization and detachment from the reality of the crimes he commits by recasting his duties into a game-like environment that he navigates and is encouraged by DRONES to perform both as a soldier and as a source of entertainment. Jodi A. Byrd's article "'Do they not have rational souls?': consolidation and sovereignty in digital new worlds" explores how videogames or what she terms "the paradigmatic media of empire," are "like the militarized hypercapitalism that informs their technological innovation and circulation – they are built upon networked systems of signs, significations, languages, and platforms that have extended sovereignty into the virtual" (429). This is why Rudy's virtual labor is both used by corporations and the military to protect the privatized water, and as a form of entertainment for DRONES. I want to distinguish Rudy from Luz and Memo because his type of virtual labor is not just invisible, but his identity is also hidden so that he is inculpable for any wrongdoing. In one scene, Rudy's first mission is featured on the DRONES show and he is illustrated as the patriotic hero that is protecting his country from aqua-terrorists, when in reality he is protecting the US corporate interests and privatization over the water in the dam. His humanity is hidden when he places an ominous mask over his head to shield his identity as he transports himself into a virtual game-like environment (see Figure 5.3). He opens and closes his fists to fire explosions through his connected nodes and he transfers his labor into this drone technology and destroys people and places with it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Byrd states that, "...the 'militaristic and melodramatic view of agency' that underscores the duplicity of individuality, freedom, and rights within the circulation of capital is something that videogames, by the very nature of their construction, reify. Units become corps; the discrete becomes divisions in military formations. Even at the embodied level of play, the immediacy of reflex and repetition, the flow and twitch of a thumb or button press, ensures whether the player is able to control an onscreen avatar successfully" (428).



Figure 5.3: Rudy hiding his identity with a mask. *Sleep Dealer* (2009).

While Memo and Luz are dehumanized and exploited by this node technology, Rudy's virtual labor takes it a step further because he becomes a surrogate human that takes on the life of a weapon. I also want to emphasize that DRONES have their own fly-away cameras following Rudy's every move on the mission to capture all the exciting action his work produces. Rudy operates as both weapon for US government and capitalist interests, as well as a performer that is pressured by his viewers to entertain and thrill them. They no longer see him as a human at this point, but rather, an object of amusement or pleasure that they can watch from the comfort of their homes, distancing themselves from the reality of the violence and death his virtual labor creates.<sup>111</sup> Just as videogame users distance themselves from the violence they are exercising virtually on screen, Rudy performs the same role here, but for an audience as well. Byrd states that this is why "videogames might allow us to interrogate seriously how the varied systems of

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<sup>111</sup> In the *Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*, it explains how psychological engagement is measured and, in this case, Rudy captures the concept of "presence" when "one is actually within a mediated environment, with no awareness of mediation and little sense of one's actual surrounding, suggesting at least a partial alteration of the normal state of consciousness."

colonialisms throughout the Americas continue to create, manage, and maintain difference...and how they rely on events to structure the intersecting systems of access and privilege attached to possessive, territorial whiteness” (434). In Rudy’s case, they suggest differences between the heroic US American soldier who is acting patriotically to protect the water from foreign threats (which is actually native to the Mexican land) and poor rural farmers like Memo’s father.

Although we do not receive a lot of background on Rudy’s character (like Memo and Luz), his story demonstrates how his body and mind are controlled and used as a weapon to hurt anyone deemed a threat, even if he knows they are innocent, thus showing how surrogate humanity even replaces the morality of humans. In his first mission he is taken to Santa Ana, Mexico and blows up Memo’s small home, with Memo’s father trying to flee both bloodied and limping. The DRONES show highlights the terror in Memo’s father’s eyes and remarks how it is rare to be face-to-face with the “criminal.” Rudy hesitates when he is told to shoot Memo’s father, but after being officially ordered to do it, he opens his fist and shoots him head-on in an explosive finish. As the DRONES audience cheer for Rudy, he removes his mask immediately to demonstrate the guilt he feels for what he has done. Killing another human being is all it takes for Rudy to be critical of the way this drone technology and virtual labor has dehumanized him as a surrogate human used as a weapon for patriotism, protection and entertainment. Rudy’s reaction indicates that he is not completely desensitized to violence as those who watch the show DRONES may be. If he were, he would not express a type of moral evaluation about what he has done, although he is too late since the damage is already done.<sup>112</sup> He realizes that despite the virtual aspect of his job and the mask to hide his identity, the reality of what he has done is all he is left with: he is a murderer. This scene also switches between Memo and his brother casually

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<sup>112</sup> According to the *Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*, desensitizing through dehumanization minimizes the “activation of moral reasoning” which Rudy was lacking during his mission.

watching the show and then realizing in horror that their father is the one that is the target and who is killed. Switching between these scenes underscores the dramatized and sensationalized version that viewers see from their television (in this case DRONES), and the reality of what is happening, specifically when Memo and his brother realize this is not just a show, but a real person violently killing real people.<sup>113</sup>

Even though Rudy tries to reject his transactional identity and surrogate humanity as a drone, he adds more harm to Memo's life by paying Luz to learn more about him, and as a result, tries to reach a critical dystopia with them and erase himself completely from the world. Rudy plays an interesting role throughout the film because he is consistently trying to do "the right thing," the wrong way. As I have stated earlier, he is a soldier continuing his family's legacy to protect his country because he perceives this as what a good son and citizen should do. When Rudy realizes the cost of his virtual labor is killing innocent people, he attempts to disconnect from this type of work but as a result, contributes to Luz's own dehumanizing work as a writer. Rudy is in fact the mystery buyer that pays her to find out more information about Memo. Like TruNode, Rudy does not perceive Luz as a human since he interacts with her solely from this online platform and this makes it easy for him to transfer his destructive labor practices on someone else.

I have already spoken at length about Luz's intentions with her virtual labor, but I want to emphasize the fact that Rudy is still contributing to the capitalist systems in place that outsource this labor toward struggling workers, like Luz. Rudy is also the reason Memo must become a virtual laborer at a sleep dealer factory in the first place. Without his father, Memo is forced to

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<sup>113</sup> In fact, the *Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology* it states that "long term media violence exposure may be associated with alterations in brain functioning that could indicate desensitization" and therefore it does not provoke a response from Memo and his brother right away. They are desensitized to DRONES's violent episodes and are only triggered when they see it is their home that is targeted, and their father who is killed.

find work elsewhere and provide for his family through other means. In this way, Rudy inadvertently functions in the capitalists' interests by paying Luz and forcing Memo to adopt the life of another expendable virtual laborer (and object) in the global economy. Even though Rudy tries to locate Memo through Luz so that he can make amends, the subtext here is that Rudy is selfishly seeking redemption at the cost of dehumanizing these marginalized virtual laborers. He becomes no better than the US government and corporations he tried to leave behind, and when he returns to Mexico with the intention of making things right with Memo, he hopes to reverse the dehumanization by erasing himself entirely. When Rudy, Luz and Memo come together to blow up the dam in Mexico, Rudy uses his drone technology to do it, even though this means he is committing treason as an aqua-terrorist. This pivotal moment shows how using his weaponized drone can be reversed and as a result, he disconnects from the US completely and wanders Mexico to disappear from the world. In a later section I will explain that when Rudy, Luz and Memo come together to blow up the dam they engage in a critical dystopia that gestures toward the possibility for a better world. For the most part, however, these three virtual laborers all face dehumanization and exploitation, but Memo's role as a virtual *bracero* in a sleep dealer factory represents the disposability of cheap migrant labor in the face of globalization and virtual labor outsourcing.

Memo's virtual labor in the sleep dealer factories is significant because it is invisible to the world since it is outsourced, but at the same time embodies and achieves the ultimate capitalist techno-utopia to have an unlimited source of labor and production, without the issue of immigrants of color coming into the country. On his first day, the supervisor gives him a tour of the facilities and explains, "This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they always wanted: All the work, without the workers." This comment signifies that the utopian

American Dream is rooted in transnational corporate interests and imperial fantasies of exploiting foreign workers like Memo rather than in giving them access to new possibilities. Moreover, as Luis Martín-Cabrera notes, “The state of exception on the borderlands thus authorizes the destruction of bodies and lives without legal recourse” (592). In this scene, the virtual *braceros* appear almost as mechanized puppets with their cords dangling from the ceiling, linked up to their nodes to perform their tasks. They also wear a face mask that covers their mouth (unlike Rudy’s that covers his face) and this suggests the oppression and exploitation they must endure since they are literally silenced with this mask to only do the work and nothing more (see Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4: Memo wearing the virtual *bracero* mask. *Sleep Dealer* (2009).

Memo’s surrogate humanity as a robot suggests that the “violence of this fantasy occurs through the desire to subsume the global racial other into the IoT’s [Internet of Things], ‘things’ by reducing the ‘cheapest’ of labor-subjects to their mere function within global capitalism” (Atanasoski and Vora 20). When Memo first connects to his workstation, he places contacts in his eyes to adjust his vision and be transported to the US where he is operating a robot for a

construction company in San Diego. This virtual labor literally transforms him into a robot and eliminates all human barriers for the employer (such as language) because they do not care to know what country this person is from, if they are a man or a woman, etc., they simply direct them to the work to be done. Memo becomes interchangeable as a human being because he is just perceived as a robot to corporations that hire him, thus embodying a true surrogate human. When the employer speaks to him, it is automatically translated by the technology into Spanish so that Memo can understand, but more important, so that the supervisor does not have to deal with language barriers.<sup>114</sup> This adds to the anti-immigrant sentiment that fulfills the capitalist techno-utopian dream of living in a world where dealing with those outside of the US is no longer an issue because a human being is filtered into the technological network and the output is a robot that does exactly what the employer wants it to (see Figure 5.5). This suggests that marginalized communities, especially poor immigrants like Memo, are the ones that will be replaced by surrogate human robots because their existence is not recognized nor valuable in the future. Atanasoski and Vora explain that “the use of robots as replacements for degraded workers confirms an already existing bias about what kind of work is dangerous, dull, or dirty, and what kind of workers can be easily replaced by machines that are more accurate and economical” (19). In a scene that relates to Atanasoski and Vora’s point above, a virtual *bracero* in the sleep dealer factory experiences a “surge” in the system that electrocutes and kills him, and then he is unceremoniously taken away. Memo also almost falls over a beam while working a 12-hour shift because of sleep deprivation.<sup>115</sup> His biological connection with the network allows for an

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<sup>114</sup> As a surrogate human there is then a, “reimagining of intimate labors as anonymous workers no longer bound by their racialized or gendered bodies” or even their language, culture, etc. (Atanasoski and Vora 24).

<sup>115</sup> Martín-Cabrera explains that, “Capital behaves traditionally as a thirsty vampire that sucks as much blood from the workers as humanly and physically possible” and this is exactly what the sleep dealer virtual laborers experience (593).



artificial intelligence to monitor his disembodied and invisible self to remind him that his pay will be docked if he cannot properly operate, and more important, assert that he (like the man killed by the surge) are replaceable as surrogate humans. Ultimately, these underlying dystopian themes of surveillance, exploitation, and dehumanization overshadow Memo's original utopian American dreams of freedom and escape.



Figure 5.5: The sleep dealer factory in Mexico and Memo operating the robot in San Diego.

*Sleep Dealer* (2009).

Memo's function as a virtual laborer and surrogate human in robot form for the company in San Diego deteriorates his body and mind to the point where he loses his grip on reality after

long hours in a virtual space, and he eventually realizes the dystopian nightmare he is living in, which pushes him toward a critical dystopia. Atanasoski and Vora explain that “service platforms that utilize people only make them invisible (reducing them to their functionality) [and this] reinscribes differential relationships to the category of the human, now mediated through digital networks and informatics” (25). Memo is being used for his “services” as a virtual laborer, which in turn reduces him to just functionality for expendable cheap labor. Memo learns his role in this utopian American Dream and organizes with other virtual laborers (Luz and Rudy) to attempt to dismantle this oppressive system that makes its laborers invisible surrogate humans. Moreover, it is to escape the “colonial fantasy” that Martín-Cabrera explains is “to separate the visibility and materiality of the brown bodies of the south from their transformation into dead labor for the predominantly white bourgeoisie of the north, thus constructing a cyber-apartheid of sorts that segregates white owners from brown workers” (594). While Memo, Luz and Rudy all share a common desire to escape the dystopian nightmare of their social realities at some point, they are never granted the financial mobility, freedom, or redemption they seek, especially if they try to do it through the American Dream’s vision of a capitalist techno-utopia. The reality is that this virtual and invisible labor does not provide an honest escape, and they are always the victims of dehumanization, and forced to be the perpetrators of it in some cases as well. When Memo, Luz and Rudy come together they conclude that the only way to enact change is to use the same digital networks that manipulate and control them, by reversing and reclaiming their power, and more important, moving toward a critical dystopia.

The critical dystopia in *Sleep Dealer* offers an alternative solution in response to the political climate post 9/11 that targeted and scapegoated immigrants, while simultaneously relying on them as a source of cheap labor to fulfill the needs of an elite class, thereby,

containing marginalized groups in a dystopian reality they can never escape. With the enforcement of new laws that deport more immigrants each year, the US has turned to an outsourced labor market for cheap workers. *Sleep Dealer*'s factories are not unlike the outsourced labor markets that presently exist and, in the future, will be technologized to prevent foreigners from ever having to enter the country. Not only have many of *Sleep Dealer*'s future predictions come true, they have intensified especially with the presidency of Donald Trump, who openly expresses anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric. *Sleep Dealer* conveys how Rivera extrapolates from current dystopian social realities through elements of science fiction, but more important, how this narrative imagines an alternative future, a critical dystopia that warns us about the present and possible future by highlighting how utopian imaginings are truly dystopian nightmares for those living in them, especially Mexican immigrants. *Sleep Dealer* gestures toward a critical dystopia because it successfully brings together a collective of activists who seek to overthrow a system and change the future, yet does not reach its full potential because of an ambiguous ending that suggests that life will return back to normal because material destruction may symbolize a lot, but without continued activism and sustainable enclaves of resistance, nothing will radically change.

Memo, Rudy and Luz unite toward the end of the film to form a momentary enclave of resistance and critical dystopia that blows up the dam by reclaiming the power in virtual reality technology. These three characters reclaim their power by using the node technology to hack into the system through Rudy's drones and blow up the dam, effectively destroying the dividing line between the two countries, and more important, allow life (water) to flow back into Mexico. The critical dystopia in this case is meant to transform the present dystopian realities and the possible future by dismantling the largest mechanisms of control: closure and invisibility. By reopening

the boundaries between US-Mexico, there is a possibility for movement and migration again. Moreover, the oppression and exploitation of virtual laborers, especially poor migrants like Memo, are exposed because along with Luz and Rudy, they show how the control and power of this technology can be reclaimed and used for good. Blowing up the dam signifies hope for saving humanity from being consumed by neoliberal policies and technologies meant to replace them as surrogate humans.

Even though this group organizes and enacts change in this moment, it is not a full-fledged critical dystopia because the ending does not suggest the continued fight for a better future. Like Don Chipote, the narrative ends with Memo's individual story and his reflection on the present and future. Jameson explains in *Archaeologies of the Future*, "Cyberspace is indeed an enclave of a new sort...once more does away with the 'centered subject' and proliferates in new, post-individualistic ways. Those ways, however, cannot be collective" (21). Jameson's comment suggests that a critical dystopia or developing a collective is difficult with this virtual technology because it is immersed in an even larger network, and in the case of Memo, Luz and Rudy – they all choose to completely disconnect from it after they blow up the dam. A critical dystopia is not fully reached, then, because they did not eliminate the system or problem, nor did they stick together to strategize how to begin to build a better future; they only contributed to dismantling a small part of it, and something that will most likely be rebuilt quickly.

I believe, however, that the possibility of building a stronger enclave of resistance is certainly possible using this network, especially after reclaiming the virtual reality technology power, but these characters do not pursue it further. Even though Rudy hopes to erase himself entirely from the world, Luz, on the other hand, has the potential to rewrite her stories and memories to generate an alternative archive based upon her experiences. Rudy and Luz's stories

are uncertain, and the only conclusion we receive is from Memo and his plan to recreate his father's dreams of having a thriving farm and more important, *freedom* to live one's life. But even this final scene is unsettling because the viability of a small farm compared to large agribusiness corporations is discouraging.

Memo's vision of a "future with a past" gestures toward the future-history he hopes to create with the lessons he has learned as a virtual laborer and surrogate human to honor and preserve his cultural heritage, but also recognizing the need for a stronger critical dystopia. Memo rejects his pursuit of the American Dream to be connected to a global network and returns to the "edge of everything" to plant new seeds of life and work with the land and soil to create a new future-history that is not reliant on technology or large corporations. Memo honors his father's knowledge, and juxtaposes it to the experiences of his present, in hopes of creating and growing something better for the next generation. This intergenerational connection illustrates the continuity of histories that get repeated and can sometimes signify a dystopia for those on the margins but may also bring about transformation and hope. Moylan explains in *Scraps of Untainted Sky* that, "the critical dystopias do not go easily toward that better world. Rather, they linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it" (199). Memo's two-way connection through the network and now the physical land puts him in a position to reimagine his dystopian realities so that he can have a chance to transform the future into what he wants.

The issue, though, is the individualistic nature of Memo's approach to futurity. In José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he explains that in order to think about futurity, concepts of "we" and "collectivity" must be included. He states, "This 'we' does not speak to a merely identification logic but instead to a logic of futurity. The

‘we’ speaks to a ‘we’ that is ‘not yet conscious,’ the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment” (Muñoz 20). Memo’s life is not the only one with an uncertain future, but a whole community of marginalized people like himself face such a future, and therefore, this ‘we’ may not yet be conscious enough to become a collective. Blowing up the dam, however, suggests that some sort of consciousness has been awakened in Memo, Luz and Rudy about their futures, and more important, the need for the ‘we’ and larger collective to be created and enact *revolutionary* change in the world.

*Sleep Dealer* addresses a complex near-future of globalized invisible virtual labor that dehumanizes its subjects as surrogate humans, objects, and commodities for transactions that manipulate and control the minds and bodies of people with artificial technology; revealing the xenophobic and anti-terrorist rhetoric that has spurred highly militarized borders and surveillance. Rivera extrapolates on the present to illuminate the laborers that exist in our economy without machines and the way they are oppressed and exploited because they are perceived as invisible, but who directly contribute to a capitalist utopia already. Science fiction has warned against the dangers of artificial intelligence, robots, and machines for decades, yet this narrative focuses on *who* is most vulnerable in getting replaced by robots, primarily marginalized communities, like immigrants of color and people of color. As Lysa Rivera explains, there is an understudied history of “Chicano/a cultural practice that employs science-fictional metaphors to render experiences of marginalization visible and to imagine alternative scenarios that are at once critically informed and imaginative.” My analysis of *Sleep Dealer* represents how a critical dystopia is useful for showing the consequences of using neoliberal practices, technologies, and networks to achieve a capitalist and techno-utopian American Dream. Furthermore, this film urges us to reimagine our futures as a collective and understand that change is not individualistic.

My next chapter on *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* will continue to build on my analysis of *Sleep Dealer* and emphasize the importance of historicizing our present and encouraging more enclaves of resistance and critical dystopias to be led by people of color so that they can fully engage in transformative world making that will create more sustainable futures.

## Chapter 6: Reshaping Our Futures with Critical Dystopias and Future-History Archives in Rosaura Sánchez's and Beatrice Pita's *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*

“This is not merely a personal thing, not an individual battle, although I have much to resent. It will be a collective struggle, a class struggle...Our struggle will be the beginning of a different world.” – *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148*

In Tomás Rivera's ... *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*), the young boy begins his journey trying to recall his “lost year.” Throughout the book, we hear the untold stories of migrant families in his community and the various hardships they have faced trying to pursue the American Dream. This collection of stories reflects the young boy's active preservation of the past and the historicizing of his present. At the end of the book, the young boy realizes that “He had made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together” (Rivera 152). In short, he has learned to think about these collective stories as a part of a larger cultural memory and history. The goal of these stories is to respond to the horrible conditions and treatment that migrant laborers faced, which ultimately created a dystopian reality for them. Even though Rivera's novel was published in 1971, I want to emphasize how this text's extrapolations from the past and present are key to generating community building and archiving memories – a type of speculative fiction framework that is essential when world making for the future.<sup>116</sup> We have already envisioned various future-worlds in the past few chapters, and with Rosaura Sánchez's and Beatrice Pita's *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* (2009), we are given a combination of history lessons, critiques of the present, and enclaves of resistance that organize to fight and imagine better futures. In *Lunar Braceros*, various stories about marginalized communities in the future are discovered and rediscovered, but more important, knowing these histories and present dystopian realities is what activates a call to action for a critical dystopia

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<sup>116</sup> Rivera's novel was originally published in 1971 by the publisher Quinto Sol.



that overthrows the systems in place and marks the beginning of a new future where people of color are not excluded, exploited or erased.

I argue that *Lunar Braceros* achieves a full-fledged critical dystopia through collective action and world making that challenges the displacement of people of color and settler colonialism in the future. Additionally, this novella represents a future-history archive because its narrative reimagines the past and historicizes the present in a dystopian future. Ultimately, this future-history archive works in collaboration with the critical dystopia to move beyond dismantling and revolutionizing oppressive systems for a better future and preserve cultural memories and spaces to prevent erasure from the “official archives” so people of color can write themselves into these histories and futures.<sup>117</sup> *Lunar Braceros* literally writes people of color back into their past and present and encourages them to resist and fight for the futures they desire.

Many of the issues I discussed in previous chapters resonate with *Lunar Braceros*, such as virtual reality, labor and immigration. For this chapter, however, I underscore the role of the nation-state, Cali-Texas, and its speculative remapping of US territories that displaces people of color onto Reservations on Earth, and stations on the moon, to achieve a utopian society that has purged its society of those deemed “undesirable.” Moreover, I convey how the settler colonial ideology embedded in this speculative remapping of Cali-Texas gets traversed by people of color living on the margins (if not on the moon or Reservations) within the Amazon’s Chinganaza. I suggest that Chinganaza represents Hardt’s and Negri’s concept of “making the commons” from *Commonwealth* to examine “struggle that not only drives the critique of the present reality of domination but also animates the constitution of another reality” because of this society’s

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<sup>117</sup> I refer to “official archives” as the public history and information administered by the nation-state.

rejection of dominant capitalist powers that want to deplete its natural resources and erase its indigenous people and their cultural histories from “official” society (121). Even on the moon, the personal memories of loved ones are manipulated to maintain control over the narrative so that moon *tecos* do not discover what their *true* purpose is up there, which is to be used for their labor, killed, and then discarded with trash after the work is done.

First, I will discuss the scholarship that has emerged since *Lunar Braceros* was published 10 years ago and define the key words and theoretical concepts I will be utilizing in my analysis to provide a deeper understanding of the way settler colonialism and displacement impacts these future marginalized communities, and their erasure from official archives in this dystopian future which later manifests into a critical dystopia and future-history archive.

*Lunar Braceros* was released the same year as *Sleep Dealer*, and this generated a lot of discourse about these two Latinx science fiction works that explored issues of labor, global capitalism, and exploitation of people of color in the future. *Lunar Braceros* is a literary text that exemplifies the way science fiction is used as a practice to extrapolate on and offer a critical reading of our past and present. Since this novella operates as a future-history archive, the narrative traces various historical genealogies rooted in US settler colonialism and empire expansion that are reimagined in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Lysa Rivera discusses this text as a “historical and cultural recovery” that works to “excavate borderland histories, rendering the invisible hands of capitalism visible and available for criticism and scrutiny.” Moreover, she uses the term “future history” to explain how this narrative is “*about* its imaginary past” (L. Rivera). I depart from Lysa Rivera’s argument, however, because I argue the future-history archive in *Lunar Braceros* is not about an imaginary past, but rather, is rooted in the real dystopian histories and present realities people of color endure and have endured for centuries. I will discuss my

understanding of future-history and its application to the alternative archive produced by the protagonist, Lydia, in the next section.

On the other hand, scholars such as B.V. Olgún discuss the “subaltern, queer, cholo-inflected, indigenous-centered, and collectivist synthesis of the Latin@ speculative project” that does not reject technology (as we see in *Sleep Dealer*), but instead uses it to create “structural transformation of the world, which necessarily involves the working class taking power and using it,” and I argue, the move toward a critical dystopia and creation of a future-history archive (138). Other scholars such as Elsa del Campo Ramírez suggest that *Lunar Braceros* portrays colonialist practices that are still deployed on the moon to convey that “this limitlessness of space does not offer any possibility for change,” and analyze how cyberspace offers access and empowerment for marginalized communities to organize, but simultaneously subjects them to surveillance and oppression (389, 390).

In my analysis, I focus on settler colonialism as a primary tool for domination and control over marginalized communities, and how this remapping creates neo-Reservations that offer limited options for escape and freedom. I do build on Ramírez’s point about cyberspace to demonstrate how these characters (like *Sleep Dealer*) reclaim this technology to overthrow the system on the moon and move beyond this victory and toward a critical dystopia that seeks to reshape entirely new worlds and realities on Earth too. Additionally, scholars such as Kristy L. Ulibarri assert how Lydia’s “absence of motherhood” offers the potential for radicalism, and Gabriela Nuñez explores the utopian food systems from indigenous epistemologies in Chinganaza. I depart from Ulibarri’s argument because I suggest Lydia is never truly absent since her histories and lived experiences are what comprise much of the future-history archive she leaves behind – she is immortalized through it. Moreover, I engage with Nuñez’s analysis of

indigenous epistemologies regarding sustainability and food systems and how it is represented in Chinganaza, but specifically as an idealized commons, that I argue is not a permanent solution because it fails to enact elements of a critical dystopia that leave it at risk of being overpowered by transnational corporations. These are several of the scholarly conversations I build on, refer to, or depart from in my analysis, and I will discuss the keywords and concepts surrounding settler colonialism, space, and the archive (specifically a future-history archive), that frame the larger arguments I am making about *Lunar Braceros* in the next section.

I build on George Lipsitz's essay on space in Bruce Burgett's and Glenn Hendler's *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition* to further develop my argument that *Lunar Braceros* deploys these concepts and terms in a future context that simultaneously connects them to past and present histories of violence, oppression, displacement, and erasure. George Lipsitz's definition of "space" recalls the creation of a free "America" and specifically the "pure spaces of New World freedom and their contamination by despised and demonized groups overseas or at home marked as 'other'," that ultimately "imagined community grounded in white masculine property and power" (228). This definition of space suggests that immigrants of color and people of color have been perceived as "undesirables" for a pure US nation-state for many years, and "the moral geography of settler colonialism required conquest, slavery, and empire" (Lipsitz 228). In *Lunar Braceros*, this goal of using space to advance settler colonialism is challenged with places like Chinganaza, and especially when a critical dystopia is created by an enclave of resistance to liberate these oppressive spaces for marginalized communities both on Earth and on the moon.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Lipsitz explains that space is a "dynamic place where important discursive and political work can be done when people recognize that space is the place in which to do it," and speaks directly to the need for world making and reaching a critical dystopia through collective action and organizing (231).

Regarding space, I focus on settler colonialism and how it displaces people of color and the way it is erased from public history and the official archive, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asserts in her work *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, and in line with Aziz Rana's argument about "settler identity" in *The Two Faces of American Freedom*.<sup>119</sup> As Dunbar-Ortiz explains in her book, the violence and injustices affecting people of color and marginalized communities are likely to be excluded from the US's historical memory and replaced with the myth of freedom and liberalism that Rana problematizes in her work because of "our long-standing difficulty in imaging liberty without suppression and free citizenship without the control of subject communities" (Rana 3).

On the other hand, these ideologies are challenged by other keywords I implement within my analysis, such as the commons, critical dystopia, and future-history archives. My understanding of the commons emerges from Hardt's and Negri's "making of the commons," and the way a critical dystopia is shaped by Chinganaza through their existing commons to serve as an example of a community working together to sustain its society and livelihood. Hardt's and Negri's description of the commons resonates with the purposes of world making, "rather than descending from above, this truth is constructed from below" specifically through collective organizing and new knowledge production that comes from people of color (121). Even though Chinganaza's commons is seemingly utopian compared to the dystopian society surrounding it, there is still a need for a critical dystopia. The critical dystopia in *Lunar Braceros* prompts the

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<sup>119</sup> My understanding of settler colonialism emerges from Lorenzo Veracini's *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* and specifically the concept of "ethnic transfer" where "Settler colonial projects are specifically interested in turning indigenous peoples into refugees: refugees, even more so peoples that have been repeatedly forced to abandon their homes, are by definition indigenous to somewhere else" and "can happen when indigenous people are moved into reservations and when they are moved out of them. The background and stated objectives of different policies can vary; there is a predictable and transferist insistence, however, on ensuring that indigenous people are serially mobilized" (35).

collective ‘we’ consciousness that we previewed earlier in *Sleep Dealer* (and was ultimately unfulfilled) and acts on it with organizing and resistance from Lydia and her family and friends.

I argue *Lunar Braceros* pushes a critical dystopia even further by including a future-history archive that reimagines the past, historicizes the present, and encourages hope for the future. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of archive is “A place in which public records or other important history documents are kept,” which suggests this “official” archive information about the public is transparent or representative of public history (“Archive,” Def. 1). The reality, however, is there are many hidden truths, especially when it comes to the oppression and violence toward people of color that gets excluded and erased from the public history imaginary. I define a future-history archive according to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s analysis that future imaginings of science fiction come from a past, a *future past*. He states, “SF’s completed futures mediate the relationship between the human present and the future” (Csicsery-Ronay 78). This mediating between the past, present, and future is exactly what the future-history archive is doing throughout the novella and is focused on the histories and stories of people of color and marginalized communities.

I want to emphasize the importance of a future-history archive that is not state-administered and controlled, but instead belongs to the people the history is about. In *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*, Grace Kyungwon Hong states, “In our moment, the exacerbated dispersal of racialized, gendered, and sexualized death is erased and legitimated by the pretense that such unequal relationships to precarity are entirely in and of the past” (20). For this reason, I build on my concept of a future-history archive (especially as working in collaboration with critical dystopia) by referring to Deborah R. Vargas’s *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* and the concept of *archisme*, which is a

combination of the archive and *chisme* (gossip) that represent unofficial discourses, and a source of unrecovered truths that can finally become legitimized (77). By uncovering these hidden histories and truths, the collective in *Lunar Braceros* engages in a critical dystopia that is enriched by cultural memory and preserves it in the form of a future-history archive. This future-history archive also become a type of “living archive,” that embodies Gayatri Gopinath’s concept of “warm data” and the affective attachments to personal archives and history as “individual, familial, and collective histories,” which also “evade or are banished from the official archive” (184). Together, *archisme* and warm data create the future-history *and* living archive that fuel the collective group’s push toward a critical dystopia for a better future that is also committed to upholding these past and present histories for generations to come.

The utopian vision for the future nation-state of Cali-Texas is achieved by displacing marginalized communities like low-income people, migrants, and people of color onto Reservations that reimagine settler colonial history and remap new territories of captivity to maintain control over “undesirable” populations.<sup>120</sup> In one of the digitized archival fragments, we learn that in 2070, the US is transformed into a new nation-state called Cali-Texas, which is primarily governed by the New Imperial Order (NIO).<sup>121</sup> As a result of this remapping, people from all over the country were forced to migrate and in reference to Lorenzo Veracini’s claims in *Settler Colonialism* about the effects of settler colonialism on identity, this turned people into refugees with nowhere else to go, except the Reservations. The protagonist, Lydia, identifies people living on the Reservations as “Reslifers,” to imply that once you live in this space, there

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<sup>120</sup> These Reservations recall the history that Dunbar-Ortiz explains as originally being “one of the Indigenous nation reserving a narrowed land based from a much larger one in exchange for US government protection from settlers and the provision of social services” that ultimately became seen as ‘gifts’ to Indigenous people and were ‘enclaves within state’s boundaries’ rather than recognized as a sovereign nation” (11).

<sup>121</sup> Cali-Texas is remapped into the following northern Mexican states and former U.S. Southwest states: Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, Sonora, Baja California, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii (Pita and Sánchez 6).

is no possibility for escape. In fact, these Reservations operate almost like prisons with wire fences to keep people physically enclosed and has a panoptical tower that monitors the inhabitants 24/7.

As Mishuana Goeman explains in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, “The maps of the nation-state do not represent real boundaries or settlement, but rather they become the tool of domination,” and this is the case with Cali-Texas’s remapping and its creation of the Reservations, and even its goals for what it hopes to do on the moon (180). The impetus for these Reservations is that they were “first created around 2090 and had become fully functional by 2100,” and expanded because of “massive unemployment and world-wide migrations. These new ‘vagrants’ or ‘*migros*,’ as they were called back then, were forced into the Reservations” (Pita and Sánchez 15). Historically, Rana discusses how New World colonies used settler colonialism as a tool of domination to gain “full independence” and “complete removal of indigenous groups” (9). Similarly, in this future, by displacing these communities onto the Reservations, Cali-Texas follows this historical violence and uses settler colonialism to remap its nation as a utopia “cleansed” of its undesirable population to fabricate a new reality that represents its privileging of a capitalist and elite society.

This remapping also makes it possible to erase those people on the Reservations from the public imaginary of “modern” or “industrial” society, such as the city space:

Of course the streets in the metropolitan areas were now clean, devoid of street people or trash. It all looked artificially sterile. Life went on behind closed doors and the underground luxury trains carried the wealthy to clubs, theaters, movie houses and shopping malls. For the most part, only commercial vehicles circulated on the freeways and street, as did the workers; the skilled labor force and professionals transported on MagLev railways. Segregation became more and more visible as it became a two-tiered metropolitan site. (Pita and Sánchez 33)



Cali-Texas's cities represent a future where artificiality is how *pure* spaces can be created, but at the same time, they only function and operate because of a segregated lower class that works to keep it going. Rana refers to Michael Mann's work to explain that "settler democracies have been linked historically to projects of ethnic and political cleansing" and this is exactly the goals of Cali-Texas with the Reservations and their two-tiered cities (10). More important, the only *movement* and *circulation* allowed in the context of Cali-Texas politics is through a segregated class of cheap labor, and this applies to those on the Reservations and those on the moon as well. This "two-tiered metropolitan site" also recalls images from the film *Metropolis* (1927) where an entire underground class of exploited laborers work to keep the city going.

Cali-Texas's two-tiered city illustrates the stark class differences between the working class struggling to survive, and the elite classes that partake in the lavish lifestyle of an "underground luxury train" and mass consumption through malls, clubs and movie theaters. But those on the Reservations seem to fare the worst of this remapping and settler colonialism since they "worked in exchange for shelter, meals and minimal medical services" that permanently barred them from overcoming physical and financial barriers (Sánchez and Pita 15). As a result, they are completely dependent on the nation-state as the only source for survival and kept in captivity because of the nation-state's refusal to acknowledge their citizenship or sovereignty. In this future, the only way of escape from this captivity is to either work on the moon as a moon *teco*, or encourage top students to use their technical expertise to participate in state-sanctioned initiatives that want to purge the historical databases and create an artificial "official" archive that promotes the Cali-Texas nation.

Cali-Texas's utopian vision to cleanse and displace marginalized communities from certain physical spaces is taken one step further by also purging archival information that casts a

negative light on the nation-state; but even worse, manipulates young and intelligent Reslifers to do this work so that they become the perpetrators contributing to the erasure of their own cultural memories and histories. In other words, Cali-Texas determines who gets remembered and who gets forgotten from the past, present and eventually, the future. Rana explains, “the dominant forms of historical memory offer little assistance in imagining social alternatives” and “simply reaffirm the notion that the present is permanent and unavoidable” (6). This is why Lydia briefly works as one of these workers because she is a “scholarship kid” but also an “anarcho” because of her protesting, and as part of her prison sentence, she is forced to be a part of the Labor Corps because of her “talents in math and science at a moment when these skills were considered important to the state” (Pita and Sánchez 14). An educated Reslifer is only “useful” or allowed in spaces outside of the Reservations if he or she will provide a specialized labor, specifically with technology. These limited options (education for technical labor) resonate with Dunbar-Ortiz’s exploration of the 1956 Indian Relocation Act, which was an incentive for young Indigenous migrants to move to urban centers to work in low skilled jobs (174). Even though Lydia is selected as one of the few to leave the Reservations to have a university-funded education, she is still held in captivity even off the Reservations when she is forced to complete her prison sentence for the nation-state.

As part of this prison sentence, Lydia faces an ethical dilemma with participating in the erasure of archival information. She shares her involvement with eliminating memory and data from digitized archives for the government as follows:

One [project] involved purging memory on all digitized materials that were publicly accessible. This called for revising historical accounts not favorable to the Cali-Texas government...huge processing centers or labs were established in Mexico and Central America to purge data banks, blogs, and even private accounts. (Pita and Sánchez 38)

Cali-Texas forces vulnerable people like Lydia to participate in their revisionist history and eliminate these “not favorable” histories about the nation-state, so that it appears uncorrupted, despite its oppressive and violent practices against marginalized communities. Dunbar-Ortiz states US history is, “a history of settler colonialism – the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft” that gets excluded from the public history narrative and warns us that those looking for alternative histories will not find them, “not even in a utopian dreams of a better society” (2). This scene is a pivotal turn in Lydia’s life, however, because it is what motivates her to reimagine her history and future through a critical dystopian lens and develop a future-history archive with *archisme* that is comprised of these silenced voices and stories left out of the official archives. Lydia realizes that creating an alternative archive will help to tell the truth about the crimes the nation-state commits, especially the ones she and her friends discover on the moon. After hearing about the murder of her partner Gabriel, she accepts a job as a moon *teco* because she is promised a reduced prison sentence and small paycheck, and this suggests that leaving Earth will lead to a better future.

Even though being a moon *teco* suggests an escape from the dystopia on Earth, instead it turns out to be just part of the nation-state’s bigger plan to displace more marginalized communities there, and more important, deny the moon *tecos* passage back to their families – literally erasing them off the face of planet Earth. Lydia and her friends quickly learn that being on the moon is no better than the Reservations with round-the-clock surveillance, labor, and captivity on the space stations, “Same shit, different place” (Pita and Sánchez 19). Rana states that US history has shown us that “the goal of economic independence and democratic self-rule rested on a continual project of expansion,” and in this case, one that is reimagined as “freedom”

from the dystopian realities of Earth but is truly another way to extend the Cali-Texas global economy and expand its Reservations on the moon (13). Moreover, the moon *tecos* primarily work on this planet to dispose of the toxic waste on Earth, and this is literally what they become at the end of their time there.

This project of expansion for Cali-Texas also becomes what is called “ecological gentrification,” a process which often leads to “people who suffered the negative effects of environmental hazards and unequal access to environmental goods are the first to be displaced when environmental improvements are made” and are often considered “locally undesirable land uses” (LULUs) (Curran and Hamilton 2). The moon itself symbolizes a trash dump, and the moon *tecos* working there are perceived this way as well, and eventually Cali-Texas’s utopian vision is to dump the rest of the “trash” from Earth out there. Similarly, Jodi Byrd explains in *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, that the purpose of the 1940 War Relocation Authority to colonize thousands of American Indians onto a reservation while also creating a “incarcerated work force who could ‘improve’ the land for future Indian, and then white and non-Indian use” which is similar to Cali-Texas’s same vision for the moon *tecos* to improve Earth’s land by removing toxic waste and placing it on the moon (185). One of the digital archives reveals information about the nation-state’s plan: “Of course we could have simply imprisoned them, but...I am not willing to redirect manpower nor are we ready to establish reservations on the moon. But that is coming, no doubt. For now, the important thing was to rid ourselves of a nuisance and did” (Pita and Sánchez 91). In what seems to be a confidential message from a government official, Lydia and her friends find this information and learn about why it was easier for the nation-state to extend job offers on the moon (rather than imprisonment on Earth), so that they could benefit from their labor, but also contribute to the

formation of a new Reservation site. Consequently, even though the moon *tecos* actively improve the Earth's land by removing toxic waste, they are creating a dystopian future-land and space for the nation-state to eventually displace those living on the Reservations on the Earth. Once again, Lydia finds herself involuntarily participating in the erasure of marginalized communities, but this time by helping Cali-Texas to remap and expand its vision for another Reservation on the moon.

To make matters even more bleak, Lydia and her new partner, Frank, discover that their work as moon *tecos* is a death wish, and they are absorbed into a disposable work force that continues a cycle of violence and exploitation of people of color. They open a waste container and find “the bodies, more like skeletons, of Frank's brother Peter and other Tecos, probably the seven that had supposedly returned to Earth five days after we arrived to take their place” (Pita and Sánchez 57). This chilling discovery exposes the graphic image of a mixed heap of trash and human bodies, literally being eaten away by the toxic waste and rendering them into skeletons – they were never perceived as humans.<sup>122</sup> I also want to note that the artwork for *Lunar Braceros* imagines these moon *tecos* already like the “living dead” with their skeletons glowing within their space suits (see Figure 6.1). This artwork also suggests the significance of *calaveras* (skulls) in Chicana culture, particularly for *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), and connects science fiction and space with a cultural symbol and tradition. In this novella though, when you come to the moon, you come to die, and are discarded like trash into the oblivion of space. This displacement from Earth also leaves Lydia and her friends prey to the nation-state's manipulation of the *truth*, and thus, they must resist and expose the realities through a future-

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<sup>122</sup> The killing of the moon *tecos* is also meant as a cost-saving mechanism because, “They don't want to use valuable shuttle or cargo space to transport us braceros back when they can take back more titanium or bauxite in their payloads” (Pita and Sánchez 64).

history archive that acknowledges and memorializes these real people and what Cali-Texas has done to them.

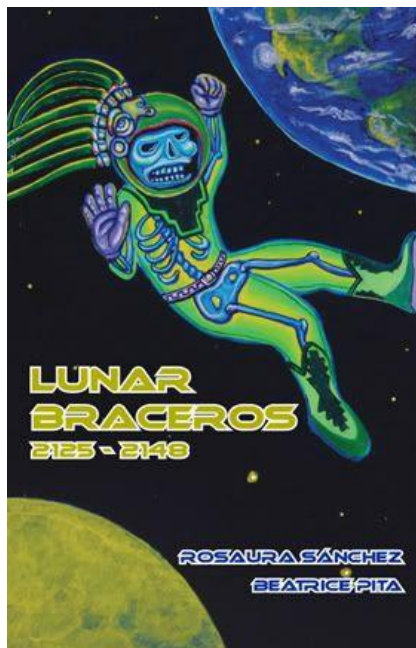


Figure 6.1: Cover art for *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* (2009) by Mario A. Chacon.

The nation-state not only actively promotes a revisionist history of its own story but also attempts to manipulate the personal memories and histories (warm data) of the moon *tecos*, so that they will continue to think their work up there is helping their families on Earth. Lydia and Frank believed that his brother, Peter, returned to Earth after his time as a moon *teco* (although as noted above, he was killed) and regularly sends them messages. In one scene, virtual reality technology is used to project the image of Peter and destabilize their memories of him:

We could both see him directly in front of us, but he was not in his spacesuit. He had on a t-shirt, jeans and sandals. It was incredible. Yes, we could both see him. I saw him too. It was a mirage. I quickly turned off my com system and pressed Frank's arm buttons as well. As soon as we turned off the com system, the mirage was gone. (Pita and Sánchez 66-67)

This scene illustrates the way the nation-state uses virtual reality to infiltrate the personal memory of Peter because he is not shown as a moon *teco*, but rather, in his everyday clothing.

This suggests that they use affective warm data to create the façade that Peter is now living happily back on Earth and erase the truth that he is stuffed in one of the trash containers with the other moon *tecos* that never made it back. The “com system” Lydia turns off represents the mind-control that the nation-state is also trying to implement on the moon *tecos*, in hopes that by destabilizing their memories of their loved ones, they will not question their place there and feel they are helping their family with the money they are sending them (although that is not even being sent either).<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the use of the word mirage, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is defined as, “a deceptive image of a distant object formed by light” adds to the overall illusion that the nation-state is trying to trick Lydia and Frank into believing (“Mirage,” Def. 1).

Even after Lydia and Frank discover that Peter is dead, they still receive messages from him: “Now we knew he had received a fake message. What that also meant was that all our messages to Earth were monitored and clearly someone at the transport station had seen the need to put off suspicious by sending the message pretending to be Peter” and this means that even if they tried to get the truth back to Earth, it would be nearly impossible with such a sophisticated surveillance system listening to their every word and watching their every move (Pita and Sánchez 57). These deceptive images and messages ultimately motivate Lydia and her friends to resist their deathly fate by reclaiming control of the com system technology (similar to *Sleep Dealer*), and then continuing the fight on Earth by exposing the truth, moving toward a critical dystopia, and creating a future-history archive that holds the important histories left out of the “official” one.

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<sup>123</sup> The manipulation of the truth connects to Dunbar-Ortiz’s point that, “the source of problems has been the refusal or inability of US historians to comprehend the nature of their own history” and in this case, it is a hidden and corrupt history (7).

When Lydia and her friends successfully plan their escape from the moon by overthrowing and reclaiming the power from the com system, they move toward a critical dystopia that not only allows for their escape, but also motivates them to continue fighting for better futures on Earth and ensure a future-history archive is created as a resource for everyone. del Campo Ramírez discusses the way Lydia and her friends “take advantage of the globality of the communication systems and technology...using subterranean network,” and while this is true for the most part, they are still highly monitored (391). I argue Lydia and her friends must adopt a more colloquial way to overthrow the technological system at first. In this case, that means developing a new language, or code-switching, that contributes to their *archisme*, to relay messages to one another about how they plan to escape the moon. Lydia explains this process as: “we communicated in sign language, inserting Spanish or caló words here and there,” but even further, they adopt this language to unite with the group of miners, Chinese and European Union camps there as well, to plan their escape (Pita and Sánchez 59, 90). The solidarity that Lydia and her friends make with these other groups signifies the move toward a critical dystopia because they are organizing a collective that will allow them to shape new realities. Lydia reflects that, “...only participation in collective action ever gave me a sense of freedom, a sense of being more than a cage animal,” and this captures the essence of a true critical dystopia that works as a collective to change the trajectory of the future, particularly for oppressed communities like people of color (Pita and Sánchez 81). Ultimately, this group successfully takes control of the com system, blows up the station, and uses the space shuttles to head back to Earth, but the fight has only begun at this point. Compared to *Sleep Dealer*, the characters in *Lunar Braceros* understand that the path to a critical dystopia does not end with the dismantling of one



oppressive structure but needs to be the destruction of an entire system, and more important, a collective effort toward this goal.

I argue the structure of the novella itself is a living archive because it transports and navigates its readers through the past, present and possible futures with warm data comprised of information and conversations (*archisme*) that are told as lessons to Lydia's son, Pedro. Lydia and her friends initiate this future-history archive by using it to expose the truth and highlight a hidden history of corruption and violence toward marginalized communities whose futures are also at risk: "We made copies of messages that pertained to the disappearance of the waste workers and miners; we already had the digital shots of the corpses that Leticia had taken" and "the massacre of miners and braceros had to be made known to the world" (Pita and Sánchez 107, 111). This future-history archive symbolizes an effort to rewrite both history and the future by creating a space for marginalized communities to share their stories and contribute to new forms of knowledge production that were not previously valued by the "official" archives. Furthermore, those miners and moon *tecos* that suffered at the hands of the nation-state can forever be eternalized in this future-history archive, rather than erased and disposed of like nothing. They reclaim their lives and memories as well, even for the ones they have lost. When Lydia and her friends return to Earth, this is an important moment in the formulation of a critical dystopia and future-history archive because it is further informed by what they learn from their time of hiding in Chinganaza.

While Lydia and her friends move toward a critical dystopia after their escape from the moon, their time in Chinganaza teaches them the importance of collectivity and "making the commons," yet this almost utopian-like environment proves unsustainable in its isolation and reminds them they must continue to fight for a future that benefits everyone. Chinganaza is a

protected space thanks to the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and indigenous movements in the 21st centuries, that allowed the Amazonian people to, “limit the incursions planned by transnational mining, oil and natural gas enterprises and kept them from destroying all the biodiversity of the area and from displacing thousands of indigenous villages” (Pita and Sánchez 21). Chinganaza represents the opposite type of “pure” space (compared to the artificial cities) because it contains a wealth of environmental resources that remain untouched by transnational corporations. This place has been isolated from the modernization and industrialization around it, and this suggests that it is almost a utopian haven for people like Lydia and her friends that go into hiding after their organizing makes them outlaws to the nation-state. Lydia and her friends find some hope and solace with the Chinganaza community, especially through their emphasis on the commons. She tells Pedro, “never to forget this particular place, our commons, and that it represents a rejection of everything that is hegemonic and dominated by capital relations. Maybe it will serve as a model for you and others like you to build a new beginning elsewhere” (Pita and Sánchez 25-26).<sup>124</sup>

Lydia hopes to teach Pedro the importance of working and fighting together as a community toward a common goal, in this case for a better future. Her description of Chinganaza’s model of the commons to reject hegemony and dominant structures directly applies to the formulation of a strong critical dystopia. Chinganaza on its own, however, will not sustain itself or build the full-fledged critical dystopia it needs to, especially with “transnational corporations [that] continue to eye the remaining protected gas and oil reserves in this small area

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<sup>124</sup> Gabriela Nuñez states that Chinganaza conveys, “that cooperative living in harmony with the human and nonhuman environment can counter environmental destruction wrought under the guise of progress,” which I agree with as far as the collaborative commons this place represents (237). On the other hand, Chinganaza is portrayed as a utopian space that may not be sustainable enough to survive with the powerful transnational corporations narrowing in on them to eventually extract their environmental resources. This is why I argue a critical dystopia is needed, but the time spent in Chinganaza is useful in shaping a stronger collective identity for Lydia and her friends/family.

of the Amazon region,” and threaten its existence (Sánchez and Pita 13). The fear is that Chinganaza will eventually be overtaken by the nation-state and bought out by these transnational corporations, rendering them as powerless and hopeless as the rest of the people of color and marginalized communities surrounding their isolated haven. Lydia recognizes Chinganaza is not a utopian solution and states, “I’m not idealizing the place,” to remind Pedro that a *true* critical dystopia seeks to overthrow all systems and shape all new realities, not just one (Pita and Sánchez 21). Curran and Hamilton also explain that, “Establishing and preserving a strong community identity is key to exposing the history of environmental racism in the area” and this is why Lydia and her friends’ move toward a critical dystopia and future-history archive is so significant (10). I argue one of the most important lessons Lydia teaches Pedro is to historicize his present, keep adding to this future-history archive, and memorialize these histories so that they never get forgotten and help forge the future.

Lydia’s future-history archive serves as the basis for our story, but Pedro’s lessons are also about history, the world around them, and more important, how to build a critical dystopia that is connected to cultural memories and histories that honor those who fought before him and inspire him to keep fighting. In one lesson, Lydia explores the scientific theory behind “dark matter,” which seems to be a reference to Sheree R. Thomas’s *Dark Matter* anthology and stresses the importance of uncovering hidden stories. Lydia explains that about 90% of the universe is dark matter; however, she explains there is a discrepancy because “the presence of additional matter that we do not perceive...It is thought that this dark matter may be different from the matter we know” (Pita and Sánchez 110). As I have mentioned earlier in my introduction, Thomas’s *Dark Matter* was an excavation project that discovered science fiction works by black people and from the African diaspora from years before. I argue this lesson from

Lydia is supposed to be a subtext for readers to seek out the “additional matter” among the other works of science fiction and speculative fiction out there, especially by people of color, and remember those stories about the past, present and future. Lydia’s interpretation of dark matter is also a metaphor for people of color who are often made invisible (or are not properly seen) but still exist in our universe. The creation of a future-history archive helps to inspire knowledge production and histories from those “we do not perceive,” or who are not considered good enough to be in the official archives. In a world made up of a dominant type of “dark matter,” it is crucial to find those on the margins, then recognize and humanize them – making them the warm data of the future-history archive.

Lydia expresses her hope in Pedro to continue pushing for a critical dystopia and the importance of writing himself into the future and this future-history archive:

Perhaps in the telling, in the writing, in the recollection of people, through memory, dialogues and scenes, it’ll all make some sense to him, fragmented though it may be. The important thing is preparing him for what is to come, but in the meantime, perhaps these recollections will be some help to him. I don’t know. Historicize, historicize, Frank says... (Pita and Sánchez 58)

Lydia’s statement embodies the spirit of *archisme*, through the “recollection of people, through memory, dialogues and scenes” and conveys how this future-history archive is narrated with fragmented stories both personal and historical, but more important, are recognized for the important warm data they provide as an affective artifact that tells not just one family’s story, but the story of many others, too. Ulibarri argues that Lydia is the “absent mother” in this story that leads others to literally birth and nurture her son Pedro, which she states is necessary for a disruption in the social order, but only as a “speculative desire” (86, 87). I argue with this point because I believe Lydia *lives* through this future-history archive and manifests more than a “speculative desire” for changing the future because she implements a critical dystopia.

Although I do agree with Ulibarri's point that Lydia must develop a non-normative family in such a dystopian world, I believe this shows her commitment to always be present as a mother (along with other family members) in a future-history archive that is comprised of the *archisme* as a type of "commons" that is a shared resource for individual, familial, and communal histories and memories combined.<sup>125</sup> This is not a restricted archive either because it invites others to expand on it (namely Pedro) as the future changes and continue this cycle of knowledge production and cultural preservation for future generations. Since this future-history archive is open to all, it aligns with the vision of a critical dystopia because "critical dystopias reject the conservative dystopian tendency to settle for anti-utopian closure invited by the historical situation by setting up 'open endings' that resist that closure and maintain 'the utopian impulse within the world'" (Moylan 189). Additionally, similar to the data thief from John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History*, who is excavating for "techno fossils," to learn about the past, present and future, Lydia leaves this future-history archive in the hands of Pedro to continue this legacy and become the new "data thief" and recorder of histories and continue to organize with others toward a critical dystopia that will make better worlds and realities in the future.<sup>126</sup>

I argue *Lunar Braceros* represents the strongest case for a critical dystopia because of its commitment to organizing and collective action beyond destroying one aspect of an oppressive system, and its recovery of unofficial (or purged) archival materials that shape a future-history archive and a "commons" of resources that highlight forgotten histories from people of color and marginalized communities in the futuristic 22<sup>nd</sup> century (and before). Moylan defines a critical

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<sup>125</sup> Ulibarri also states, "When the corporate state dismantles the family through labour exploitation and violence, it paradoxically produces that which speculatively will undo it" (91).

<sup>126</sup> Ulibarri explains that this novella ends with the idea of "reproductive futurism" and the belief that "Pedro must march into the future as the new 'world making' generation," but I would argue that this is only partly true since a critical dystopia is unsuccessful with just an individual, but calls for a collective; and also, Pedro is partaking in a larger collective narrative already through the future-history archives Lydia has left behind for him (94).

dystopia in *Scraps of Untainted Sky* as an active pursuit of changing current social realities and to:

...give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects (and, I would add, to those diminished and deprived by the accompanying economic reconfigurations) they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized people not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain profit for a select few. (189)

People like Lydia represent the many people from settler colonial spaces like the Reservations, or even places of captivity beyond the Earth's sphere on the moon, that are the displaced and dispossessed communities at risk of erasure in the future because of a destructive system that thrusts them into a never-ending state of dystopia and powerlessness.

As Moylan notes, a critical dystopia is not simply about surviving the future, it is an active reshaping, remapping and reimagining of what future realities look like. I believe a critical dystopia is especially important for people of color because they carry the generational trauma of oppressive, racist and exploitive systems that either eliminate or forget them in most future narratives.<sup>127</sup> I also want to underscore that a critical dystopia is not complete without a knowledge of the past or present, either. Reaching a critical dystopia is crucial to world making, but so is historicizing and contributing to a future-history archive. Together, a critical dystopia and future-history archive will lead to futures that are influenced generationally by those before us; by those who did not have the chance to speak; and finally, those who did not make it into the present, but whose memories can be a part of our futures.

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<sup>127</sup> Moylan states this shaping of new realities by critical dystopias “also revives and privileges totalizing analyses that consider the entire political-economic system and the transformative politics that are capable of both rupturing that system and forging a radical alternative in its place” (190).

*Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* builds from many of the issues and themes I have addressed in my earlier chapters but succeeds in creating what I consider to be a full-fledged critical dystopia. Although the ending of this novella does present an uncertainty about the future (as do the others), there is an implication that collective action, organizing, and resisting dystopian and dominant forces in the future will continue for Lydia, Pedro and their other friends and family. The evidence of this continued struggle and fight is found through the fragmented future-history digital archive that we read, and this serves as a foundation for learning about the world in the past, present and future. *Lunar Braceros* invites people of color to write themselves into these futures, while also recognizing the dystopian pasts and present realities in the face of institutionalized racism, settler colonialism, violence, and erasure.<sup>128</sup> This novella warns us that like in the past, a future nation-state (like Cali-Texas), may use its power to create the utopian world it wants by trying to remap and displace people, and erase marginalized communities from the land and public history imaginary – unless we do something about it.

I believe this novella is useful when thinking about how we can practice speculative fiction and world making in our classrooms and communities. For example, the project I will be discussing in my conclusion, Front|eras, is another version of a future-history digital archive in the form of a choose-your-own adventure game. Front|eras lays out the dystopian future landscape for its users but encourages them to take charge of their personas and choose their own destinies. These users help to shape our present and future by the choices they make. *Lunar Braceros* illustrates the significance of layering multiple narratives to frame new perspectives from a marginalized voice. In my conclusion, I will explore how works like *Lunar Braceros* and the other works of speculative fiction I have analyzed in my project motivate us to develop

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<sup>128</sup> Moylan states that critical dystopias are also used to expose “the horror of the present moment” (196).

speculative tools of knowledge that will inspire future generations to engage in critical dystopia, world making, and writing (and envisioning) themselves in the future.



## Conclusion

### Speculative Fiction in Practice for World Making, Community Building, and Teaching Today

“Science fiction isn’t just thinking about the world out there. It’s also thinking about how that world might be—a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they’re going to change the world we live in, they—and all of us—have to be able to think about a world that works differently.” – Samuel R. Delany

In 2018, Janelle Monáe released her album *Dirty Computer* along with a 48-minute “emotional picture” full of magnificent visuals, music, and more important, a story that needed to be told.<sup>129</sup> In the film, Monáe plays the character Jane 57821 in a future society that hunts and abducts people to be “cleaned.” Jane 57821 provides some context at the beginning, telling her viewers: “They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty...It was only a matter of time.” When Jane 57821 is captured, she is strapped to a gurney and undergoes a process where they render her unconscious by using a gas called “nevermind” and purging her memory so that they can replace her old life with a new identity they can control. When viewing some of Jane 57821’s memories, the scenes show her and her friends being threatened and even abducted by these unknown entities that want to “clean” them and recalibrate who they are to fit into their vision of a utopian society. Jane 57821’s mind, however, is a compilation of real memories and imagined pasts, presents, and futures; making her an aberration in the system’s cleaning processes – it is difficult to know what is real and what is imagined so they decide to try and purge it all.

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<sup>129</sup> You can watch the video here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE&has_verified=1)

Janelle Monáe's work has always used elements of science fiction, speculative fiction, and Afrofuturism to make music and videos that criticize our dystopian realities and provide alternative narratives for people of color. But in the wake of the Trump election, and the rise in white supremacy and violence against people of color, Monáe took five years from her last album, *Electric Lady* (2013), to create *Dirty Computer* because she was committed to speaking out about our dystopian present and encouraging us to make changes right now. In an interview with *Vulture* Monáe states:

The election is when I knew it had to be done. My activism, and my job, and my purpose as an artist is to figure out how I can celebrate those who are marginalized, and who are oppressed, and I just feel like that's been my calling throughout all of my work. I think *Dirty Computer* just does it in a more near-future sense. The previous albums did it in a further future tense — the year 2719 — and *Dirty Computer* deals with a nearer future.

*Dirty Computer* is an artistic, political, musical and visual work that celebrates those who are different, whether it is racially or sexually—and urges us to reclaim the power over our minds, bodies and lives; and resist those who oppress and exploit us and fight for the futures we want for ourselves.

At the end of the *Dirty Computer* film, Jane 57821 and her friends/lovers hack the system, use the nevermind gas against those people in the facilities keeping them there, and as they escape out the door to freedom, Jane 57821 turns to give us a triumphant smirk suggesting that this is only the beginning of a new world to come. I conclude my dissertation with this brief synopsis of *Dirty Computer* because it resonates with the works of speculative fiction by people of color that I have analyzed in each chapter; and it reaffirms the significance of practicing world making and the need to generate critical dystopias through organizing and collective action to dismantle the racist and oppressive systems that try to erase people of color from the future.

*Reclaiming the Future* is inspired by the many stories told by people of color that reimagine the past, present and future in creative and thought-provoking ways to make what I have called in this analysis a speculative cultural study. Whether the stories represent another idealistic or utopian vision, navigating dystopian worlds, or moving toward a critical dystopia—all are significant stories to know about because of the rich cultural memories entwined in them about immigration, labor, racist science, mass incarceration, criminalization; and what may happen in the future with the possibilities of technology, surrogate humanity, virtual reality, intergalactic settler colonialism, and future-history archives. Part one of my dissertation highlighted those early speculative fiction writers Pauline Hopkins and Daniel Venegas, that do not get classified as such, but were indeed engaging in elements of science fiction and speculative fiction in their work to grapple with issues such as emerging industrial technologies and the transactional identity for Mexican immigrants; or, new forms of knowledge production from African mysticism and the occult (a speculative technology) that challenge (or sometimes reinforce) racist science experimentation and exploitation of black people in medical and scientific fields.

Although *Of One Blood* and *The Adventures of Don Chipote* may not provide the critical dystopia we need to enact radical change, they do help us to understand the world people of color were experiencing during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the remnants of hope or warnings they left behind for future readers. Part two of my dissertation shifts into the later 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century to convey how speculative fiction is used as theory and practice, and to analyze its visual representation in film for mass audiences. *Wild Seed* illustrates how Octavia Butler's archiving, journal writing, and researching informed the way she wrote her novel. More important, Butler used speculative fiction as a practice of extrapolating from her past and present

to theorize and envision different possibilities for the future, especially regarding reproductive justice and freedom for poor women of color in the 1970s. Jordan Peele's contemporary film, *Get Out* is similarly influenced by the world around him, and visualizes the speculative horror of everyday criminalization and mass incarceration of black people, and the fight to recognize the value of black people, black bodies, and black lives.

The final part of *Reclaiming the Future* shifts us to the science fiction visions by Latinx authors and film directors that predict the struggles for people of color in future dystopias that are often entrenched with the structural racism, exploitation, and oppression of centuries before. Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* explores the future of migrant labor and surrogate humanity, and affective or weaponized virtual reality that prove advanced technologies and global networks may actually alienate and harm people more than they connect them in a society of global capitalism supported by cheap invisible and virtual labor. Rosaura Sánchez's and Beatrice Pita's *Lunar Braceros 2125-2148* reproduces violent histories of settler colonialism and historical erasure to emphasize how speculative fiction and science fiction can be used to drive us into activism and world making: a critical dystopia comprised of a collective of people working in solidarity toward destroying oppressive systems to make the necessary changes to our world in the future. *Lunar Braceros* also explicitly underscores the need to protect and preserve the untold stories of people of color in a future-history archive where this knowledge can be shared because of the revisionist histories out there that try to hide or erase them from the "official archives." My aim in this dissertation was to bring forth these stories from the past and present to urge more people of color to continue using speculative fiction to criticize, practice, speculate, and write themselves into these futures.

I am also encouraged by the scholarly works released in the past decade that are dedicated to speculative fiction by people of color and highlighting their stories from various perspectives. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* is a work I constantly refer to because of its combination of creativity, theory, and activism that produces what co-editor Walidah Imarisha calls "visionary fiction," which is a term "to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power" (4). In many ways, people of color who write speculative fiction are visionaries because they must approach the past, present or future from a marginalized vantage point that does not always get recognized. In Aimee Bahng's *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*, she refers to this marginalization as "the waiting-room of history" and says that those inside of it "are in fact being written out of the future" (5). *Migrant Futures* is another incredible example of how speculative fiction can be applied in provocative ways, in this case as a comparative reading with speculative finance, which "relies on an engine of speculation, extrapolation, and projection to render value out of the not yet" (Bahng 2). Bahng's analysis emphasizes the "alternatives to capitalist realism" because of the world making and collectivities that are formed by "transnational affiliations among communities of color that extend networks of care beyond national narratives of 'risky subject' and the calculations of global financialization" (16, 17). Additionally, Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* is a scholarly text that analyzes speculative fiction using intersectionality to theorize how disabilities, race, gender and sexuality are "simultaneously identities, experiences, systems of privilege and oppression, discourses, and historically situated social constructions with material effects" (8). Schalk interprets speculative fiction as a shift in "an epistemological orientation and

practice that is invested in coalition building and resistance to dominant structures of power” and I would argue, contributes to the primary elements for a strong critical dystopia that creates enclaves of resistance that work in solidarity to challenge and dismantle systems of power and oppression, an especially significant tool for people of color to use in social justice and activism (8).

Anthologies such as *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* have also insisted on the preservation and acknowledgement of Indigenous futurisms to “experiment with, sometimes intentionally dislodge, sometimes merely accompany, but invariably *change* the perimeters of sf” (Dillon 3). This statement reinforces my argument that speculative fiction should be used as a practice to spur true action and change in the world. Shelley Streeby’s *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* is another significant work that explicates the social movements propelled by people of color and Indigenous people fighting for the future of climate change as a result of fossil fuel industries destroying the land and contributing to severe global warming that puts all of humanity at risk. Others works such as the anthology *Alternmundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* edited by Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín, Curtis Marez’s *Farmworker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*, andré m. carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, and David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu’s *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, discuss and interrogate how people of color generate alternative visions of the future, and sometimes reimagine the past and present in them, to illustrate why representation in these stories matters and can influence more people of color to take an active role in changing

the present right now by *practicing* speculative fiction to resist oppression, develop critical dystopias that seek to change the system, and use world making to reshape our futures.

While *Reclaiming the Future* thinks about speculative fiction as practice and theory through literature, history, film, American Studies, archiving, and research, this past year I wanted to expand upon my work by applying this methodology to collaborative world making projects and integrating what I call speculative tools of knowledge in the classroom through digital media and the digital humanities. In 2018-19, I participated in the year-long program on speculative design and policy called San Diego 2049 through the Arthur C. Clarke Center for Human Imagination and School of Global Policy and Strategy. When I first heard about this program, I was ecstatic about the opportunity to create a project about my visions of the future, but after the first few “world building” workshops, I realized that the larger issues of structural racism and oppression toward people of color were *still* being overlooked. Being there simply reaffirmed my beliefs that the only way for people of color to be written into the future is to engage in these sometimes-uncomfortable spaces of white and class privilege and advocate for people of color and their humanity in the future. Fortunately, I found others like myself interested in these questions that looked beyond some of the limiting stories science fiction often tells about technology or science; and together we made up the only interdisciplinary group of more than one woman, people of color, and diverse fields of visual art, computer engineering, communications, humanities and ethnic studies graduate students. Together we created a digital choose-your-own-adventure game called Front|eras, using the digital media platform Twine.<sup>130</sup>

Front|eras is a hybrid word that represents both the new frontiers that the future will bring, and the existing borders or *fronteras* that pose both a physical and abstract barrier to

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<sup>130</sup> You can play the game here: <https://ucsd-fronteras.itch.io/fronteras>

historically underrepresented communities. Our game addresses US-based institutional policies regarding surveillance, immigration, tourism, virtual reality technology and future laborers. This game also creatively examines how existing frameworks affect people of color and immigrants; and imagines how such systems will evolve in the future. *Front|eras* imagines San Diego 30 years from now, a technological playground with virtual reality technology that provides an escape to those wealthy enough to pay for it. People become so immersed in this virtual world that they stay for extended periods of time, completely neglecting their physical bodies in the real world. As a result, many *transfronterizeros* cross the border each day to perform the hospice type of labor to make a living and survive in a world that is on the cusp of collapse. With enclaves of resistance like *ContraVR* there is hope for a better future, and the message is clear: we need to be critical of the current political, sociological, and environmental conditions to prevent this type of future from happening.

Our game represents stories from six different personas made up of protagonists and antagonists: a federal agent, a refugee, a *transfronteriza*, a university student, and everyday people living their lives. These narratives were created to highlight a silenced voice and give a platform to people of color. This game is a space to share anxieties and fears about the future and the possibility that the systems of oppression in place now will only become exacerbated in our probable high-tech future. We provide these different perspectives to give our users a choice and feel a part of the story itself and know that they are ultimately the ones who shape their own future. By sharing this project with our community and students, we hope they will recognize what is at stake and that they have a critical role to play in world making and being change-makers by practicing speculative fiction in their everyday lives.



Working on Front|eras transformed the way I think about our future and the concept of world making. After many hours of conversations and thought-experiments about our group's concerns and how we could tackle these issues in our future, I realized we can enact change now, and the best place for this to begin is in our classrooms. Fronter|as is certainly not the solution, but rather the beginning of what I call a speculative tool of knowledge that can be created by anyone. Digital media and digital humanities projects such as this one will transform our education because our community and students will not only feel represented in these narratives, but they will be the ones engaging with and creating them. Our community and students are the knowledge-producing agents of the future.

I have already experimented using digital media and digital humanities with my students at San Diego Miramar College for my English 101 course on writing and composition, through a science fiction and speculative fiction perspective. As part of the honor's component, students use the free multi-modal platform Scalar as a digital companion to their final research papers on science fiction and speculative fiction narratives about climate change. I am always fascinated by the projects my students create and how their unique personal stories inspire their projects. One student from Brazil developed a Scalar project that discussed the dystopian slums in Brazil and how enclaves of resistance are working together to envision better futures that resist poverty and climate change: a gesture toward a critical dystopia through collective action, and a new speculative tool of knowledge production.

After my work on Front|eras, I believe that I need to facilitate more conversations about world making and critical dystopia among my students. My goal next semester will be to ask students to work as a group using Twine to develop alternative narratives for either of the two graphic novels we read, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* or Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*. I love

teaching *Kindred* because we implement Butler's archiving and theorizing practices with speculative fiction by exploring the Library of Congress's online archive for histories and slave narratives by prominent writers like Frederick Douglass. When the semester ends, my students express the impact this course has on them and their newfound appreciation for science fiction and speculative fiction. They reflect on what they have learned from the histories of the past, are critical about the present, and reimagine better futures for themselves.

I plan to keep the momentum going with more digital media and digital humanities projects like Front|eras and practice applying it in the classroom with my students as well. Our Front|eras group also wants to collaborate with the San Diego Digital Gym Cinema in the future and invite community members to partake in creating their own choose-your-own adventure tales to add to our collection of stories. I want our project to be shaped and molded by anyone who is inspired to tell their own story. Front|eras is a palimpsest, meant to be altered and rewritten based on the experiences and lives of those who choose to engage and insert themselves in these future narratives – it is the foundation for a living future-history archive.

Many times, people of color and marginalized communities cannot fully engage in world making and critical dystopian thinking because they are just trying to survive, and they do not have the luxury to imagine new futures when their realities prevent them from overcoming financial, racial, and class barriers. But I do have some hope. I think about my own ancestors, my grandparents and my parents, and all the sacrifices they have had to make to survive and in doing so, whether they know it or not, have paved the future for the rest of us. My family's stories represent the lived and living experiences that I want to tell because they are primarily about survival in a dystopian world, but also the hope to change it. These family stories were some of my first history lessons on racial politics, the labor movement, activism, and more important,

world making and critical dystopia. Imarisha states in *Octavia's Brood* that "We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility to be birthing visionary stories," because this is what will inspire people to participate in making new worlds and envisioning better futures (4). Imarisha adds that, "Because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world" and it matters that people of color are represented in these stories to encourage more dreams about what the world could be (4). Walter Mosley also expresses in his essay "Black to the Future," that science fiction and speculative fiction hold a transformative power because, "This power to imagine is the first step in changing the world" (406).

Imagining is just the beginning though, and does help us to theorize, but *practicing* speculative fiction is what will enact true change in our world. My hope is to continue speaking to more scholars, community members and students about how we can engage in more narratives of visionary fiction. But how can we even begin to imagine better futures when it seems like our world is on the brink of apocalypse? As I write this I reflect on our recent dystopian realities: another horrific school shooting in Santa Clarita. A chilling video of a woman screaming for help as a van drives through a neighborhood looking for women to kidnap and sex traffic. And finally, the worst flooding that Venice, Italy has experienced in 50 years because of climate change. My *abuelita* used to tell me about her days as a young girl picking cotton as a migrant farmworker in deadly heat, and later fighting for better working conditions by marching with Cesar Chavez to Sacramento in 1966. My father tells me about his own upbringing in the 1970-1980s, living in extreme poverty, among gang violence, and being criminalized for being brown; he tells me he never thought he would live to see his twenties. These current events and my family's own histories remind me that there are so many factors that contribute to a person's dystopian

nightmares. History has shown us that people of color are often the ones that struggle the most to navigate in these dystopias, and it is difficult to know if things will get better in the future. But the most important lesson I have learned is that collectively, people of color do have the power to reclaim their past, present and future, and it all begins by writing themselves into those narratives and recognizing this intervention is *an act of science fiction and speculative fiction* – that they are the change makers with the ability to reshape and make the world they want.

The conclusion of this dissertation, in part, is a reprint of the material as it appears in the essay “Crossing Pedagogical Front|eras through Collaborative World Making and Digital Storytelling” in the forthcoming volume *Beyond Digital Fronteras: Rehumanizing Latinx Education*. Horcasitas, Jeanelle D.; Quintanilla, Olivia, in consideration by Oxford University Press, 2020. Jeanelle D. Horcasitas was co-author of this essay.

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