Towards Dark Fecundity - Reimagining Black futures through visual arts practice, science fiction and Greek mythology

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ABSTRACT

Towards Dark Fecundity - Reimagining Black futures through visual arts practice, science fiction and Greek mythology.

This thesis articulates the development of my visual art and critical practice, exploring Black, female subjectivities within speculative narratives of the future. It proposes a new term, *Dark Fecundity*, which seeks to describe and integrate the radical potentiality of repositioning Darkness as a synonym for Blackness within constructions of the future, alongside the reproductive capabilities implied by the term fecundity.

The thesis charts the development of my practice from 2014 - 2020 through an autoethnographic lens whilst critically engaging with Afrofuturism and a range of expansive Global Majority futurities developed by artists and thinkers, particularly those of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993.)

Towards Dark Fecundity centres the work of writer Octavia Butler as a frame through which to consider the transformative practice of destabilising hegemonic narratives within the expanded field of speculative fiction. Alongside Butler, Ursula Le Guin's 'carrier bag' theory of fiction is a guide through which my work has manifested in a range of forms including 'socially engaged' practice (Helguera, 2011), workshops, video and installation.

This thesis charts the development of my practice, including the development, employment and rejection of the now extant term *aPOCalypso*. Through exploring notions of 'service' (Fraser, 1994) my practice is discussed in relation to shifts in the funding and commissioning landscape in England over the last decade.

Finally, the critical and artistic work discussed in *Towards Dark Fecundity* introduces my ongoing project, *Hailing Frequencies Open* (2018-), which is led by a trilogy of influences - the Greek myth of Andromeda, the dubious legacy of HeLa cells and Nichelle Nichols' pivotal work with NASA. My research places this trilogy at the nexus of concerns around Black womanhood, futurity, temporality and world building.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Towards Dark Fecundity - Reimagining Black futures through visual arts practice, science fiction and Greek mythology considers the radical potentiality of creating artistic visions of the future centring Black, female subjectivities based on an interconnected network of Black women of fact and fiction, across time and space. My research considers what can happen when fictional worlds within the expanded field of speculative fiction (that I will sometimes refer to as *speculation*) locates its world building functionality at the heart of those previously marginalised.

What is speculative fiction?

Speculation can be found in creative work across all forms; for the purposes of this thesis, I focus on visual art, television, film and sci-fi literature. Attributed to Robert Heinlein,[1] the question of what constitutes speculative fiction is generally understood as work that encompasses non-realist fiction including science fiction, fantasy and magic realism. it extends beyond the realm of just science fiction.

Whilst fantasy is largely derived from myth, magic realism combines realism with an often-surreal sense of fantasy and is most commonly associated with work arising from Latin America. Science fiction (or sf) can be described as imaginative fiction that is potentially scientifically plausible; it may not be futuristic as such. Speculation, therefore, allows for the existence of a broader expression of non-realist sensibilities. Australian sf writer Rjurik Davidson defines it as 'an umbrella term for non-realist or non-mimetic fiction. It includes science fiction, magic realism, fantasy..' (Davidson, online, 2010) which I find to be a useful working definition.

Others, including andre carrington, do not necessarily find it useful to define speculative fiction at all (carrington, 2016.) carrington does, however, make a distinction between the 'Whiteness of science fiction with the speculative fiction of Blackness' (carrington, 2016, p21) as part of a reparative effort in recognising the marginalisation of Black people within

1 To my knowledge, the term was first used in his 1947 essay, *On The Writing of Speculative Fiction*

the genre. He discusses the 'constructive and even constitutive relationship with knowledge formations germane to speculative fiction' which he places in relation to Black people's survival within a racist system converging in 'transformative.. reparative' ways (both carrington, 2016, p22).

Both of these perspectives are useful to consider in this introduction. Davidson's more conventional understanding of genre distinctions provide a helpful tool in understanding some of the materials I reference in this thesis, whereas carrington's intervention on the role of Blackness provides an entry point into the specificity of my own theoretical and artistic contributions to the discussion.

This thesis is centred around key developments in my research practice, and I critically document my trajectory in developing a taxonomy to further articulate my concerns at the intersection of race, gender and speculation initially through the extant term *aPOCalypso* (2014-2018), and the contemporaneous *Dark Fecundity* (2018-). The former collides three words to propose a playful, creatively destructive futurity that centres previously racially marginalised subjects, the latter harnesses the potentiality of Darkness as a conceptual space from which new futurities can grow.

Both are explored in greater detail in the Methodology chapter, where I also document how I employed this term during a significant period of my visual art practice where I worked within in a so-called 'socially engaged' (Helguera, 2011) framework - in the form of a performative think tank the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* (2014-2018) - in response to institutional imperatives to a gallery based solo practice. Many theories and practices under discussion were initially of great importance to my work but are no longer integral. By delving into rejected practices, I reflect on the entirety of my journey to my current understanding of what my practice is, where it fits within the broader field of visual art and which conversations I am contributing to. Most notably, this includes the period of the ABIFR and my rejection of aPOCalypso as an appropriate terminology.

Key terminologies and thinkers

I will introduce key thinkers including writer Octavia Butler (1947 - 2006), pivotal figures such as Nichelle Nichols (b.1932) and critical concepts including Afrofuturism (Derry, 1993) all of which my work is engaged with and indebted to; their influence can be felt throughout my practice. As a precursor, let us consider some of the terms that will reoccur throughout my research, my understanding of them and how they are often utilised within the broader field of speculative practice.

What is futurity?

At its most fundamental, futurity can be considered as the quality of being of the future, a noun derived in reference to the Futurist movement of early 20th century Italy that aimed to 'capture in art the dynamism and energy of the modern world' (Tate.org.uk, 2021). Spearheaded by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876 - 1944) who published the *Manifesto of Futurism* in 1909, Futurism responded to the new age of machines with a sense of 'almost hysterical exhilaration' (Harrison, Wood, 1992, p127.) It soon inspired poets and artists in Russia, who developed their own version. Marinetti could be found racing and crashing cars during street races, enthralled by the possibility of mechanised speed. Harrison and Wood remind us that until the invention of the steam engine 'no one had travelled quicker than a horse could run' positioning Futurism as an attempt to 'map human consciousness in terms of flux, change and sensation.' (both Harrison, Wood, 1992, p127.)

In terms of how I utilise the term futurity, it is this philosophical turn that most interests me, rather than the possibilities of new technology (indeed, one wonders what Marinetti and friends would make of the technological possibilities of the present day.) Philosopher Franco Berardi (b.1949) describes the 'enthusiastic expectations and proclamations'(Berardi, 2011, p.11) of Italian Futurism (1909 - 1944) which he declares the first avant-garde movement. For Berardi, the future is not 'the direction of time' but rather a 'psychological perception' emerging out of 'progressive modernity and cultural expectations' (Berardi, 2011, p18.) Berardi posits that the future is dead, having been 'trampled and drowned' (Berardi, 2011, p19) by capitalism. I have great empathy for Berardi's pessimism, which is effectively the mirror opposite of Marinetti's post World War One optimism. Within the century between these philosophies lies the birth of myriad contemporary futurisms discussed in my

research. I shall expand on why I propose to transform Berardi's despair into a more generative, activist and expansive reproductivity in the Methodology chapter p48.

I argue that futurism has expanded from its Italian origins, to embrace both the possibilities of temporality and to anticipate new dimensions of community formation. Novelist Margaret Atwood cautions against a singular conception of the future, instead preferring to '.. carefully say a future rather than the future because *the* future is unknown: from the moment now, an infinite number of roads lead away to "the future," each heading in a different direction.' (Atwood, 2011, p.5.) I interpret Atwood's comments as being in sympathy with the scientific (and sf) concept of the multiverse – that what is 'out there' is potentially multitudes. It is propitious to also keep this in mind when considering the multitudinous futurisms on offer within critical discourse on the subject.

Afrofuturism

The term *Afrofuturism* (Dery, 1994) was initiated by critic Mark Derry in the text *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel L. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose* (1994). Derry described African Americans (note the specificity) as 'the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare…and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies' (Derry 1994, p180), referencing the Tuskegee experiment, branding and forced sterilization – we will return to these atrocities in the chapter *The Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future*, page 103.

Derry introduces the term by posing a question, ca a 'community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?' (Derry 1994, p180). Alongside the work of the writers referenced in the title of the text, Derry also engages with the work of 90s hip hop pioneer Rammellzee[2] (1960 - 2010), Jean Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), and John Sayles's influential film *The Brother from Another Planet* (Sayles, 1984). The latter, a sf classic about a Black alien who crash lands in Harlem, had an irrefutable impact on my imagination when I first encountered it as an undergraduate.

2 Rammellzee developed his own theory of *Gothic Futurism*, which Derry also discusses in the text.

Derry's text and conversations generated a rich, ongoing dialogue during the 1990s and 2000s amongst an important group of writers who expanded the theoretical framework for Afrofuturism including Black critics and artists such as Kodwo Eshun, Alondra Nelson, Greg Tate and DJ Spooky. In his text, *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism* (2003) Eshun uses the imaginative framing device of an imagined team of African anthropologists from the future to simultaneously historicise Toni Morrison's acute argument that enslaved Africans and their descendants were 'the first moderns' (Eshun, 2003, p.288) and to insert the concept of 'countermemory' defined as 'an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten, the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures' (Eshun, 2003, p289). Eshun also incorporates critical discourse on imperialism, coloniality and the socioeconomic diminution of Africa into our understanding of futurism, expanding the locus of Afrofuturism beyond the United States and into a broader sense of an African diaspora. Eshun proposes Afrofuturism as a 'program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection' (2003:302.) Eshun gives Afrofuturism the agency of a 'tool kit' a 'multimedia project distributed across the nodes, hubs, rings, and stars of the Black Atlantic' (Eshun, 2003:302) drawing on Paul Gilroy's[3] pivotal work (Gilroy, 1993), which he proposes we consider as a work of science fiction.

Eshun has contributed to Afrofuturist studies in other texts, public events and through the collaborative The Otolith Group (2002-) subsequently. What made *Further Considerations* so radical to my understanding was not only the ideas contained within, but the artistic device employed to explore these ideas.

It is important to recognise that what is now termed Afrofuturism can be traced to earlier artistic practices such as composer and iconoclast Sun Ra (1914-1993) from the 1950s onwards and the work of George Clinton (1941-) of the Parliament-Funkadelic collective that came to prominence in the 1970s; Black Americans did not suddenly start engaging with a generative collision between Futurity and Afrocentrism through their art in the 1990s. Furthermore, contemporary musical artists particularly Janelle Monáe (1985-),

3 *The Black Atlantic* is discussed further in the Methodology chapter.

Solange (1986-) and Missy Elliot (1971-) clearly employ imagery, musicality and lyricism that work within an Afrofuturistic landscape. I explore some of this work further in the *The Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future*, page 76.

Equally important is the recognition of how much Afrofuturist work has been undertaken in the sonic sphere – in addition to Ra, Clinton and others already mentioned figures such as Alice Coltrane (1937 - 2007) – who I return to in the *Encyclopedia* chapter page 76 – have significantly influenced generations of visual artists and filmmakers. The Black Audio Film Collective's *The Last Angel of History* (1996) and the work of Larry Achiampong (b.1984) are two examples of this across generations – I would include my practice here also.

Equally, a new generation of theorists have developed their own interpretation of Afrofuturism, as well as proposing new terms as I do in this thesis – these ideas are explored in greater detail in the Methodology chapter page 47. Here, I discuss some of the nuances of Afrofuturist though, and its application in the broader context.

In the book *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction*, Adilfu Nama describes Afrofuturism as 'the variegated expressions of a black futurist imagination in relation to black cultural production, technology, cyberculture, speculative fiction, the digital divide and science fiction' (Nama, 2008, p160.)

A more technocratic, but expansive definition comes from Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman who describe Afrofuturism as a 'sub-genre of science fiction, fantasy and myth, magical realism and draws upon non-Western cosmologies to interrogate and critique current conditions of Black and other people of color to examine the past and envision different futures.' Here, the authors implicate non-American Black people, which makes this definition somewhat unusual. They propose the genre 'considers issues of time, technology, culture and race, focusing on Black speculations about the future, foregrounding Black agency and creativity, explored through literature, film, art and music. (Jackson, Moody-Freeman, 2011, p3)

Ytasha Womack suggests that Afrofuturism is a response to social dynamics with the 'diversity of the nation and world increasingly standing in stark contrast to the diversity in futuristic works,' – by this she is referring to the lack thereof – 'its no surprise that Afrofuturism emerged' (Womack, 2013, p6.) I find this analysis neglects the earlier expressions of Black futurity mentions above, although Womack does draw attention to the critical mass that led to the rich discourse of the 1990s.

Womack has a generous definition of *who* get to be an Afrofuturist, stating that sci-fi and fantasy fans and the like who ever 'wondered why black people are minimized in pop culture depictions of the future, conspicuously absent from the history of science, or marginalized in the roster of past inventors and then *set out to do something about it*' (Womack, 2013, p6) (my italics) could also quality as an Afrofuturist. This is intriguing, as it proposes an active engagement with making and doing as a point of entry. For Womack, it is an 'intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation' (Womack, 2013, p9) that 'unchains the mind' (Womack, 2013, p15.)

Womack's concept reconfigures Eshun's notion of recovery from enslavement to hidden black contributions to science and public life. She anticipates the activism embodied by artist and founder of the AFROTOPIA art and film programme Ingrid LeFleur, who ran for mayor of the city of Detroit in 2017 on an Afrofuturist platform. Detroit is 85% Black. LeFleur has a background in education and witnessed first-hand the impact of poverty, for example on school children's ability to concentrate in class. When asked about what made her platform Afrofuturist, LeFleur stated that 'Afrofuturism is a way of life, it's a philosophy. So everything I am thinking about doing is Afrofuturist' (vice.com, 2017). As an example, for LeFleur, ensuring all citizens have access to water is 'protecting the Black body, which is Afrofuturist … the very fact that I am centring the Black body makes it Afrofuturist' (vice.com, 2017.)

Whilst I do not feel that Afrofuturism is a useful terminology at this point, it is useful to consider the nuances within existing discussions of the term in relation to the terminology I propose in this thesis.

The changing fictional landscape

This period of my practice also took place synchronously with a radical shift in the representational landscape of Black women within speculative fiction, particularly on television, in cinema and via the work of (mainly) Black women authors. In this introduction, I draw attention to this as a way of situating my sculptural, moving image and text-based work within a shifting representational schema.

This Thesis is comprised of the following chapters:

Methodology

The Methodology chapter introduces the key terms aPOCalypso and Dark Fecundity, tracing their genealogy, development (and in the case of the former, subsequent abandonment) and importance to my practice. It includes a comprehensive literature review and survey of relevant constituent futurisms, artistic practices and thinkers.

Integral to this is a broader discussion on the question of Blackness as it pertains to the specific context I work within – that of a third-generation descendant of Jamaican heritage in the United Kingdom. A necessary component of that is discussion on the trajectory of 'Blackness' as a social and political category, and the shifts in language and terminology in the late 20Ath and early 21st centuries.

A significant part of this chapter is a consideration of the importance of the work of Octavia Butler on my practice and on the field of speculative fiction more generally. Butler is key to the development of my imagination as a creator of speculative work; her relevance cannot be understated.

This chapter culminates in a practice timeline, detailing key works and moments relevant to this thesis.

Octavia Butler

This chapter explores the work of speculative fiction writer Octavia Butler and her influence on my practice. This includes an introduction to her bibliography and an account of how

ideas generated from her practice has impacted my own imagination and the work described in this thesis.

The Incomplete Encyclopaedia of The Black Woman in the Future

This chapter revisions the form of the encyclopaedia to explore *Hailing Frequencies Open*, the body of work I have submitted for this PhD.

Here I consider the trilogy of influences that inform Hailing Frequencies Open; the ancient Greek myth of Andromeda (and the galaxy named after her), the story of Henrietta Lacks and her HeLa cells (the first human materials sent into space) and the influence of Nichelle Nichols ("Uhura" in the television programme *Star Trek* (1966 - 1969) and its early cinematic films, in addition to her combined status as a science fictional icon and disrupter at NASA.

To adopt the language of Situationist International (1957 – 1972), this chapter can be read as a détournement, a variation of what an encyclopaedia could be. Reflecting the ways in which I work with research material I want to position this trilogy as a repository of knowledge. Much in the same way, an ongoing series of video work produced in conversation with Black women scientists, (entitled *Hailing Frequencies Open* with the individual scientist's name as an entailment) positions the subject as knowledge producers as significant contributors to both their field and the broader world of HFO.

This chapter necessitates a discussion on the exploitative relationship between Black women's bodies and medical science, specifically from the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (16^{th} – 19^{th} centuries) onwards. In response to my production of sculptural work, I also discuss the monument and counter monument in art, particularly reflecting on the work of artists including Kehinde Wiley, Simone Leigh, Jeanette Ehlers and La Vaughn Belle and theorist Nicolas Mirzoeff.

The Uses of Design Fiction

This chapter is a explortion of work produced during an earlier iteration of my practice when I worked under the rubric of the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research,* a peripatetic

think tank concerned with the production of possible future*s,* and a consideration of the conditions of labour this work was produced under.

As a detailed narrative history of the ABIFR, this chapter discusses a key project undertaken as a commission from Primary arts organisation in Nottingham, England in 2015. It discusses pivotal ideas within the critical recent history of socially engaged practice and related practices, particularly discourses from the 1990's onwards and the ethics and aesthetics of artists working with communities. I also consider the form of the performative lecture, as this was the main public representation of my practice during this period.

The Potential of the Think Tank

Here I consider the possibilities of the think tank as a subversive form for art practice. An early iteration of my interest in the authority of structures that facilitate the organisation and dissemination of ideas, I consider the role of the think tank in politics and civil society and discuss examples of other artists practices that take on the think tank as a form including Tania Bruguera and Renzo Martens.

Furthermore, the role of the think tank-type structure within space science and the influence of this phenomenon on my development of the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* helps to contextualise why I chose to work with this model during this nascent stage of my engagement with the potentiality of futurity from a non- hegemonic perspective.

Conclusion

In the concluding chapter I synthesise my research practice, the ideas contained within this thesis and the trajectory of my practice during the period under consideration. I draw upon the previous chapters to further articulate how my original contribution to the field explores my critical practice of creating visions of the future that I wanted to see, one where Black women were central, not peripheral or non-existent. Moving beyond visual representation, my research places multi-generational Black women's knowledge generating capacity are the forefront.

By developing a theoretical construct within which my work can exist and be understood, I demonstrate how my research methodology necessitated the creation of new terminologies to expand the field of Black futurity and thus contribute to ongoing conversations regarding how to imagine, explore and describe the future.

First, I will discuss *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019) a television programme that provides a revolutionary speculative narrative around the superhero mythos, the birth of the hero, Blackness and the creative potential of reimagining history – all with a focus on a Black, female character. *Watchmen* is an instructive place to begin, as it is in many respects the type of complex, political, aesthetically pleasing speculative fiction that feels radical – the kind of work my practice wants to call into being. In the conclusion I will return to this programme and position it as an example of Dark Fecundity writ large.

Watchmen

Upon embarking on this body of research in 2013, it would have been unimaginable to find myself watching a television series such as *Watchmen* (HBO, 2019).

Taking place as a reimagined version of the original comics by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* is a speculative drama set in an alternative present-day United States of America staring Oscar winning African American actress / director Regina King as the main character, 'Angela Abar', a masked avenger policewoman.

Fig 1..*Watchmen* (2019), HBO.

In this alt-universe, African American descendants of enslaved Africans have received reparations (in the show, they are referred to as 'Redfordations', named after the President of 30 years, the actor Robert Redford) and largely comprise the American Middle Class, poor whites live in ghettos (most notably a trailer park called 'Nixonville', named after the disgraced former President) and white supremacists are the main terrorist threat.

Watchmen's first episode begins with a depiction of the real-life Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, otherwise referred to as the Greenwood Massacre or the Black Wall Street Massacre, during which a white mob attacked the residents and businesses of one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the United States, via land and air. The mob destroyed 35 blocks of Black businesses in Tulsa, Oklahoma including banks, shops and other civic services. Up to 300 people were killed during the attacks, with 800 people admitted to hospital and over 6,000 Black residents arrested (Tulsahistory.org, 2019)[4]

The history of the massacre – a terroristic, racially motivated attack directed towards an African American community - and its aftermath - the decimation of a prosperous, thriving Black community in the United States – has largely been neglected at state and national level (New York Times, 2011) until a state commission was launched in 1996, 75 years later, which published its report in 2001. The Tulsa Race Massacre Commission recommended, amongst other things, the payment of reparations to descendants of massacre victims. This recommendation has not been enacted.

To encounter, therefore, in the first episode of *Watchmen* an alternative vision that imagines, through speculation, a version of history whereby reparations are a reality is extraordinary. That this speculative proposition is embodied by a Black actress in her late forties, playing a well-rounded character with a marriage and (adopted, white) children who is a secret policewoman / masked superhero feels dizzying. The casting and subjectivity chosen as the basis of the reimagining would have seemed unimaginable even a few short years ago.

To some so-called 'fan boys' it is a deeply disturbing development – the online backlash to the reconceptualization has been predictably ferocious. This backlash has been refracted through a supposed unease with how political the show is (Vox.com 2019) (despite the fact that the comic book source material is explicitly political – Alan Moore is an avowed anarchist.) There has also been an attempt to sabotage ratings for the show on website

4 Information also taken from the Final Report of the *Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921*, which was published on February 29th, 2001, and is retrievable online.

Rotten Tomatoes, an important review aggregating site (Esquire.com, 2019). This tactic – of down-rating speculative television shows and films that de-centre white, male subjectivity, has also been used for against other properties, including the most recent Star Wars trilogy.[5]

The new *Watchmen,* on a representational level at least, feels a good place to begin to work through my central thesis – considering the ways in which Black women are (or are not) present within speculative media, specifically visual art, television and film. How are Black women present in the future? What does this tell us about the contemporary moment? How does visual art – and moving image culture more broadly – create space for Black, female futurities?

Furthermore, *Watchmen* appears to be undertaking some of the reparative work of speculative fiction identified by carrington, almost literally as in the final episode ("See How They Fly") we are left with the distinct impression that Abar is about to become the embodiment of 'Doctor Manhattan' – a (formerly white, male) comic book superhero with unlimited powers[6].

The Initial impetus behind this research – and the body of work that it is in conversation with - is my lifelong discomfort at being deeply invested in Speculative Fiction as a genre, yet rarely represented in it as a Black woman or indeed as a young girl. It was inspired by the question, where are Black women in the fictional future?

With rare exception – most notably the work of Octavia Butler, and more recently writers such as Nalo Hopkinson and Nnedi Okorafor, the visual and sonic landscapes created by Janelle Monae as part of her 'Cindi Mayweather' persona and the legendary figure of

5 Reporting, based on research conducted at the University of Southern California, suggests that more than half of the negative responses derived from bot farms or rightwing political activists; a significant percentage of these appear to be based in Russia. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/02/star-wars-the-last-jedi-rian-johnson-abuse-politically-motivated-russian-trolls (Accessed 30/12/19).
To my knowledge, no such research has yet been conducted into the origins of so-called troll responses to *Watchmen,* but it follows a similar pattern.

6 A summary of Doctor Manhattan's mythos is available at:
https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Jonathan_Osterman_(Watchmen) (Accessed 10/8/21)

Nichelle Nichols' 'Nyota Uhura' from the *Star Trek* franchise – Black female characters and perspectives have traditionally been underserved within the genre.

Furthermore, taking into consideration the maxim that speculative fiction is largely concerned with working through contemporary anxieties,[7] what might the historical lack of Black female subjects – and sudden introduction of new Black female led narratives in shows such as *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017 -), and Lovecraft Country (2020) tell us about the contemporary moment?

The Obama Effect?

Fig. 2 The Obama Family. 5th April 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza.)

At the time of writing, it is inarguable that there are more Black, female characters with plausible subjectivities within television and (to a lesser extent, but perhaps with greater

7 For example, Ursula Le Guin (1929 -2018) writes that 'science fiction properly conceived… is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on' (Le Guin, 1996, p154.)

impact) cinematic film, with the cinematic juggernaut that was *Black Panther* (Cooglar, 2018) exploding onto Global consciousness the image of 'Shuri' a young, Black girl as technological genius portrayed by Guyanese-British actress Leticia Wright, in a fictive technologically advanced contemporary African society. Black Panther has to date generated more than $1.3billion (Time, 2019) in box office takings alone. A sequel is in the works. Black Futurities have proven to be a financially lucrative proposition..

Alongside its principal focus, the cultural conditions this thesis describes is inevitably impacted by the global impact of the Obama Presidency (2009 -2017.) I posit that the effect of the image of a good looking, young, Black nuclear family propagated across the world for eight years, significantly impacted the commercial viability of Black alternative-futures and other forms of speculation. It is no coincidence that the Obama era saw a significant rise in US television series with high powered Black female leads such as *Scandal* (2012 – 2018) or *How to Get Away With Murder (2014-*) or upper middle class Black families (including *Black-ish, 2014 -*). The prosperous Black nuclear family even became the focus of a superhero television show *Black Lightning* (2018 -2021). Black characters, Black leads and Black families were no longer perceived as international box office liabilities, and the Obama's global reach meant that it was conceivable to launch a property with an (almost) entirely Black cast in - for example - China and anticipate considerable box office success.[8]

Nonetheless, within the European context, erasure and misrepresentation remains a characteristic phenomenon. Recent examples include an 'Afrofuturism' exhibition at Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, which featured no Black artists at all. Much like the Asian inspired mise en scène in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), that seems to exist in a world without the presence of actual Asian people, this suggests a desire for Black futures, without Black people.

The exhibition, *Space is the Place* (2019) takes its name from the most well-known film and composition by Sun Ra and his Arkestra, released in 1974. Regarded as an artistic and

8 As evidence of this, Saudi Arabia's first cinema to open in 35 years choose Black Panther as its inaugural film (Guardian, 2018)

intellectual forefather of Black Futurity in the Diaspora, Sun Ra is a central figure within the pantheon of Afrofuturist forefathers. The exhibition combines Sun Ra and South African billionaire tech guru Elon Musk as curatorial inspirations. The latter is an interesting choice, bearing in mind his intention to 'colonise' Mars, as colonialism implies a violent, culturally devastating process for indigenous people and any other colonised subjects[9]. A letter by 'Soup du Jour,' a collective of Berlin based art workers, drew attention to the problematical nature of the show, and of greater failings within the host institution itself (Frieze, 2019, The Guardian, 2019)

At the conference *Afroeuropeans 2019: Black In/Visibilities Contested* in Lisbon in 2019, I also witnessed an erasure of Blackness from Afrofuturism during a panel on the subject. Organised by a group of white, German academics – who announced they had 'discovered' Afrofuturism via the movie *Black Panther* (Cooglar, 2018*)*, I joined a sizeable group of Black delegates who walked out of the panel due to the cultural arrogance, lack of expert knowledge and the egregious privileging of whiteness on display.

The above experiences are significant, as they signify the particularities of developing art and theory on Black futurisms within a European context, a context that I would argue Afrofuturism does not quite allow us to access.

What does the above tell us about Black Futurism's potentiality and future applications? I argue that we are in a particularly productive, generative time for the reconfiguration of our understanding of how the future is constructed, and by whom. My practice is developing within the context of climate emergency, the ever-presence of state violence against Black bodies, the demand for an intersectional feminist praxis and the technological advances available to artists, filmmakers and other visually creative people. The possibilities of creating visual representations of the future that are distributed within the broader international cultural sphere, the wider African diaspora, amongst peers in one's town or

9 During 'Constructing Realities,' (2018) a talk at Bartlett School of Architecture in London with space architect Barbara Imhof, I referred to colonization as 'death' for the original inhabitants of the land in question. My theory is that the desire to 'colonize' Mars speaks to the desire to continue white domination beyond this planet.

city – and be in conversation with these various contexts and beyond – has created an unprecedented vitality and quality and vitality of possible Black futures.

I therefore position my work as a contribution to the growing, multitudinous forms of world building that centre marginalised subjectivities. This endeavour has implications for the genre of speculative fiction more broadly, positing the kind of worlds that this re-centring might create through visual art, visual culture and critical theory, and for the cumulative effects such imagining might bring in ontological terms.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to a critical corpus on and around the subject of futurity within visual culture that centres Black female subjectivities – most notably my own, as both artist and theorist.

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

Octavia Estelle Butler is in many respects the most significant contributor to my understanding of the potentiality of speculation as a mode of practice. From my own point of view, Butler's pioneering work legitimised and validated the role of imagination in my practice in unanticipated ways. That is to say, my relationship to Butler and her work is as much emotional as referential. It is foundational.

There is now a great deal of Octavia Butler research available, from across the academic spectrum including Black feminist studies, queer theory, ecofeminism, medical humanities, social justice theory and science fiction studies, and as I discuss later in this text Butler's influence on artists, writers and other cultural figures continues to grow. Here, I am going to focus on Butler's import to my practice and describe the ways in which I utilise what I have learned from Butler in my work.

First Encounter

I first encountered Butler in the early 2000s, when I was a member of a listserv run by artists Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, members of the Otolith Group, who were enthusiastic fans, their work is discussed later in this chapter (Eshun's critical work on Afrofuturism is also discussed in the *Methodology* chapter.) Butler died in 2006, and her legend appears to have grown in subsequent years, across genres and geographies. Indeed, on the dedication page of their anthology 'Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements '(2015), editors Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown describer Butler as being 'a north star for so many of us,' (Imarisha, 2015) encapsulating the feeling of immense relief I felt upon discovering her.

I devoured Butler's work, reading her entire oeuvre in a short period of time. Butler speaks to the complexity of how to build community, how to be in the world (this world or another), how to reconcile with oneself, gender identity and fluidity, climate disaster, hybridity and cross species co-existence often through the lens of Black, female protagonists and/or multi-racial communities.

Speculative fiction fandom can often feel lonely inasmuch as viewers or readers who are not white and male (the dominant gaze within the genre) are rarely more than sidekicks, if they appear at all. I very rarely saw myself mirrored in the books, film and TV available to me, with the notable exception of 'Nyota Uhura' (Nichelle Nichols) from *Star Trek*, as discussed in *The Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future* chapter page 82.

In her exploration of Afrofuturism Ytasha L. Womack describes how 'black people are minimized in pop culture depictions of the future, conspicuously absent from the history of science, or marginalized in the roster of past inventors' (Womack, 2013 p6). Candra Gill asserts that this presumed Black non-interest in the genre, is 'given as a justification or explanation when discussion turns to the issue of racism in sf portrayals of blacks and other people of colour' (Gill, 2013, p137). As Isiah Lavender makes clear, 'science fiction has an unwarranted reputation for being "progressive" in matters of race and racism' (Lavender, 2011, p4.) I would argue this is particularly the case when matters of race have traditionally received an allegorical treatment (with aliens as stand-in's for racially marginalised humans, for example). My engagement with speculation in relation to my practice is an act of reimagining the past, present and future through a speculative lens, with Black women as the main (or, only) protagonists.

It is important, however, to apply nuance to our understanding of Butler's employment of racial dynamics in her work. Butler's work is not merely a response to racist exclusion in the genre, or just about race. What is revolutionary about Butler is the way in which she unapologetically shifts the previously marginalized to the centre. As Lavender articulates, by 'questioning dominant social paradigms and dismissing them, Butler undermines racial coding in sf with a black woman protagonist without explicitly talking about race' (Lavender, 2011, p24.) Here Lavender is discussing the *Parable's* series (which I will address later in this text), but the general sentiment remains relevant in terms of Butler's impact on my work. Butler is not reactive, as such – she makes an active choice to base her narratives around black women. This distinction is key.

Butler articulated a sense of bemusement in her chosen creative path in the early days in her essay, 'Positive Obsession,[10]' 'I was writing science fiction and fantasy, for God's sake. At that time nearly all professional science-fiction writers were white men. As much as I loved science fiction and fantasy, what was I doing?' (Butler, 1996, p133).

Later on in her career – now celebrated author – Butler was often faced with the question, '"What good is science fiction to Black people?" I was usually asked this by a Black person.' (1996:134) she writes. Butler goes on to say, 'I resented the question. Why should I have to justify my profession to anyone?' (1996:134.)

I have also been faced with this question throughout the period of time I have been developing this body of work. Why speculative fiction? Why Space? Why the future? What my love for Butler's work has given me is an overriding alternative question, 'What future shall we make?' Butler's work and example has provided a touchstone in the practice of imagining '.. a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.' (Imarisha, 2015, p3.)

Butler's futures are about the radical potentiality of creating 'a shared dream for the future' a variation of the '..social justice work, which King embodied, and Butler expressed so skilfully in her novels and stories' (Thomas, 2015, p1). This assertion reiterates the connection between Dr Martin Luther King Jr and Nichelle Nichols ('Uhura') discussed in the *Incomplete Encyclopaedia of The Black Woman in the Future*, pages 85 – sf and activism as acts of imagining. As Walidah Imarisha responds, the connection between the two is always, "Everything. *Everything*." (Imirisha, 2015, p3). I imagine, in Butler's own voice, her facetious, rhetorical response, 'And what good is all this to Black people?' (Butler, 1996, p135.)

Butler's work challenged everything I had previously experienced in terms of representation within speculative fiction. Immersive, evocative, complex and deeply humane, her stories go

10 The essay was originally published in Essence magazine (a lifestyle magazine for African- American women) in 1989 under the title "Birth of a writer." Butler did not like this, her preference was "Positive Obsession," which is the title of subsequent reproductions of the text.

back in time, present an easily recognisable potential near future and project into the far future, on this planet and others of her imagination.

Fig. 3 Octavia Estelle Butler signing a copy of *Fledgling* , October 25, 2005.. (Credit: Nikolas Coukouma.)

Who was Octavia Butler?

Octavia E. Butler was born in California on June 22nd 1947 and died after a fall outside her home in Seattle on February 24th 2006. A shy child, she was a precocious reader from a young age. Butler describes determining to be a writer, even when her aunt insisted that '…Negros can't be writers.' (Butler, 1996, p127). We can see evidence of how this determination to follow her own path continued throughout her life in her novels, essays, interviews and notes she wrote to herself in her commonplace books, which are now in the collection of Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in California.

Butler grew to 6ft tall during adolescence, which along with her shyness made her an easy target for bullies. Writing offered refuge, Butler writes, 'I hid out in a big pink notebook..

There I could be a majestic horse, a Martian, a telepath… There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these (Butler, 1996, p128.) I strongly identified with this sense of escape through fiction, and through art, as it was a feature of my own childhood.

Like Butler, I too have funded my life and practice in the past with menial and unglamorous jobs – cleaning, retail and call centre work on my part, warehousing, potato chip inspection and telemarketing for Butler.[11] Like me, Butler was dyslexic.

This biographical mirroring – in addition to the representational mirroring proposed by a Black, female author – is an additional facet of my appreciation of Butler's work. As someone who had been engaged with speculative fiction for as long as I could remember, becoming cognisant of the ways in which Butler made space for herself – her Black, female, working class self – made my own aspirations for my practice feel more possible.

In her lifetime, Butler was awarded a MacArthur foundation 'Genius' Grant (1995), Nebula and Hugo Awards for *Parable of the Talents* and *Bloodchild* respectively, as well as a PEN West Lifetime Achievement Award for her body of work. Posthumously, Butler was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame (2010). Her work has reached an increasingly broad audience in the last decade and is the source of several forthcoming television adaptations; I discuss these later in this chapter.

Body of work

Butler only published 12 novels during her lifetime, one of which – *Survivor* (1978) – she disavowed.

Here, I will summarise Butler's published works, highlighting aspects of her worldbuilding and storytelling that have clear resonance for my work. I've placed them in chronological order as it pertains to the narrative arc, as opposed to the date of publication.

11 The author biography at octaviabutler.com provides further info and Butler also discusses her previous survival jobs in 'Positive Obsession.'

The Patternist Series

Wild Seed (1980)

Mind of My mind (1977)

Clays Ark (1984)

Survivor (1978)

Patternmaster (1976)

The *Patternist* series is based around the relationship between two phenotypically West African immortal beings 'Duro,' who is many thousands of years old and transfers his consciousness between hosts, and 'Anyawu,' who is a shape shifter and resistant to his plans. Beginning in the 17th century (and thus intersecting with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade), the series ends far into the future. The novels in this series explore the consequences of 'Duro's' selective breeding programme, from which he aims to create a race of super beings. 'Duro' succeeds in creating a race of gifted, powerful telepaths that he struggles to control.

Later books in the series deal with struggles between future humans and advanced telepathic beings on other planets, creating a vision of the kind of sharply divided worlds that 'Duro's' genetic engineering creates. Throughout the series, questions of social construction, race, biology and the question of what a person – or a people – are prepared to do in order to survive are explored through Space and time.

Practice

I detect an engagement with the question of biological manipulation and the attempt to create a new being – a new version of life – in the ways in which *Hailing Frequencies Open* imagines a future for Hela cells. Specifically, the idea of the cells becoming beings with agency in their own right. This is the mythos behind the journey that the sculpture *Anarcha Mission: Andromeda II* (2019) embarks on, within the conceptual framework of the project.

Moreover, Butler moves between time periods, and between Earth and Space, and critically engages with the ethical implications of immortal God's manipulating humanity, which is also pertinent to my interest in the story of Andromeda.

Xenogenesis Series, known as Lilith's Brood post 2000.

Dawn (1987)

Adulthood Rites (1988)

Imago (1989)

The central premise of the *Lilith's Brood* series is that the human tendency towards self-destruction condemns the entire species; a new species must be born.

In Dawn, it is revealed that a nuclear war has destroyed Earth. What remains of the human race are 'rescued' by an alien race, the Oankali. The story of our central protagonist, 'Lilith,' takes place 250 years after this cataclysmic event aboard a Oankali ship. Butler queers this story by making the Oankali a species of three genders, who reproduce by manipulating other beings' genetics. A bargin is on offer – the aliens have made Earth inhabitable again and will return humans to their planet if they agree to breed with them. Humanities future is also possible if they become more than human. 'Lilith' becomes the mother of the first human child, hence the title of this series, (in the editions published post 2000.)

In subsequent books we see the power relations and resistance on Earth towards this new regime. These books are largely based around hybrid offspring trying to find their place in this new society.

Butler sharply addresses the human tendency towards destruction and continues her exploration of the dichotomy between resistance and acquiescence, which may also be acceptance of new realities.

We also see the recurrence of God-like beings – aliens in this case – who perceive of themselves as saviours but are (initially at least) experienced as oppressors. Again, we can see Butler transforming the post-enslavement condition into a science fictional framework.

Practice

In their essay, 'Strange Matings and Their Progeny,' Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl identify that the 'inevitable crossing and blurring of boundaries such matings entail often

bring with them physical and emotional pain' nonetheless, Butler proposes that 'these matings are key to her characters survival, both for the individual and for the group.' (Holden, Shawl, 2013, p1.)

The idea of the needs of the collective versus the individual, and of an essential transmogrification as a tool for survival of a species feed into the Seven Generations workshops I discuss later in this paper, as well as my general thinking around the potential of mutated HeLa cells with agency creating a Space programme. Butler poses the question, 'what shall we become in order to survive?' I am interested in what might imagine if we think beyond survival – what kind of societies might we create.

Parable's series, also referred to as the Earthseed series

Parable of the Sower (1993)
Parable of the Talents (1998)

The *Parables* series are apocalyptic near future ecofiction stories based on the creation of a new spiritual practice, *Earthseed*, which aims to take humanity to the stars.

The first book in the series, *Parables of the Sower,* a 'climate change book of Exodus' (Lucas, 2021) begins in 2024 – the very near future at time of writing – and is set in the USA. The world is facing ecological disaster including a water shortage and a viral measles epidemic, gangs are rife, and corporations play an outsized influence on everyday life - a context ripe for authoritarian rule. It is fascinating that *Sower* became a New York Times bestseller in 2020[12], within the context of covid-19, President Donald Trump, the anti-racist human rights protests that are purportedly the largest in America's history[13].

12 This blog post from Butler's publisher provides further information. Available at: https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2021/03/cheering-for-the-astronomical-excellence-and-latest-accolades-of-octavia-e-butler.html {Last accessed: 22nd July 2021}

13 Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html . [Last accessed 26th July 2021]

Our main protagonist 'Lauren Oya Olumina' begins the novel as a teenager living in a gated community as society collapse around her. 'Lauren' eventually creates a religion – or spiritual path – based on mutuality, care and respect for nature based on the idea that 'God is change' (Butler, 1993) she calls this 'Earthseed'.

Lauren central premise is that Earth's future is in the stars and that her adherents must leave the planet to being again. The second novel, "The Parable of The Talents' focusses on her daughter 'Larkin Olumina' aka 'Ashe Vere' (who initially is not aware of her parentage.) Upon uncovering her mother's journals, Larkin learns about her struggles including the enslavement and persecution that accompanied her fall from grace. Meanwhile, a Christian fundamentalist President Jarret vows to 'Make America great again' (Butler, 1993.)

The novel culminates with Jarret defeated in disgrace and 'Earthseed' rehabilitated in the public imagination to a large extent. 'Lauren' does not live to see her community take to the stars' she dies watching the first shuttle leaving the Earth on the journey to Alpha Centauri, the closest planetary system to the Earth's solar system. The shuttle meets the starship, named *Christopher Columbus*.

Practice

There is a clear connection between the mythos I am developing for the journey of HeLa cells to the Andromeda Galaxy, and my central principle of a project generated out of the scientific, intellectual and creative labour and legacy of Black women throughout Hailing Frequencies Open.

In building the mythos of a *Hailing Frequencies Open*, I can clearly see how my imagination has been positively infected by Butler's expanded storytelling and multigenerational thinking. Butler is also one of the key influences in my interest in creating fictive narratives that involve the potential for Space travel as a necessary step in search of a way of life that makes the future possible. To quote Butler's protagonist from the *Parable of the Sower*, 'Lauren Olumina,' HFO proposes that, 'our destiny is to take root among the stars' (Butler, 1993, p77). I am reminded of 'Earthseed' when I think about the sculpture installation that

formed *Rewriting The Future* (2019), which is discussed in greater detail in *the Incomplete Encyclopaedia* chapter page 111.

Additional novels and short stories

I will briefly reference Butler's remaining works; these are less pertinent to my practice:

*Kindred (*1979) – a time travelling slavery survival novel, the story of 'Dana' a young African American writer in 1976, who finds herself being pulled back in time to a plantation in pre-Civil War Maryland, where she encounters a white slaver and a free Black woman who are both her ancestors. The story traces Dana's difficulty in living between worlds, and her growing realisation that she needs both ancestors to live in order to be born, condemning her Black ancestor to a life of rape and torture at the hands of her slaver.

In many respects, Butler is one of the pioneers of the futurist slave narrative genre. We can see the influence of *Kindred* in the 2020 horror film *Antebellum,* staring musician and actor Janelle Monáe, whose contemporaneous character awakens on a Louisiana plantation. Monáe has also produced some memorable Afrofuturistic visual imagery in her music, via her fictional character 'Cindy Mayweather,' a fugitive cyborg from 2719. In her music videos including *Many Moons* (2010) 'Mayweather' embarks on various adventures in love and revolution, as explored in Monáe's albums *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013) in particular.

'Fledgling' (2005) – a vampire novel whose protagonist, Shori, is a 53-year-old vampire in the body of a pre-pubescent child. We learn that all vampires are white, and that Shori was created as part of a genetic experiment (a recurring theme in Butler's work.) Part courtroom drama, part thriller the novel returns to Butler's themes of race, gender, power and the way they intersect.

Butler also published the short story compilations 'Bloodchild and Other Stories' (1995) and 'Unexpected Stories' (2014).

Seven Generations

I want to discuss in further detail a workshop model l have developed, which I have undertaken several times, including in educational and gallery-based settings. *Seven Generations* is an illustrative example of the way in which I incorporated my interest in speculative fiction, theories of futurity and design fiction as a practice into the workshops I developed during this time. commissioned by artist led initiative LOW PROFILE (Rachel Dobbs and Hannah Rose) for *Jamboree* (2018) a festival for 150 artists, curators and other arts workers, which took place on the Dartington Estate, Devon[14].

The setting – a grand estate including a stately home and grounds – in the English countryside, was an unusual setting for my work. I only encountered one other Black person in the entire cohort over the three says I was on site, an artist of mixed heritage who took part in my workshop. I did not know what to expect, or whether the focus of my work would be of interests in such a monocultural group. I was pleasantly surprised at the openness with which the participants approached my ideas and connections they were able to find for themselves. With hindsight, this experience gave me enormous confidence by validating my contention that Blackness can be a route to a kind of universality. That Black stories are – and can be for Others – the centre, not the margin, as this thesis demonstrates.

Thirty-eight participants took part in *Seven Generations*. To begin, I introduced ideas around time, labour and value through the work of Franco Berardi and his theory of a kind of cultural collapse of our collective ability to imagine (and thus create) the future caused by late capitalism (Beradi,2011).

A second key text was one of several notes Butler left as part of her archive at The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. In this particular note – which I initially encountered via the Huntington's Instagram page - Butler is effectively willing her future into being:

14 Jamboree 2018 Archive, available at: https://archive.artistsjamboree.uk/ [accessed 29th June 2021.]

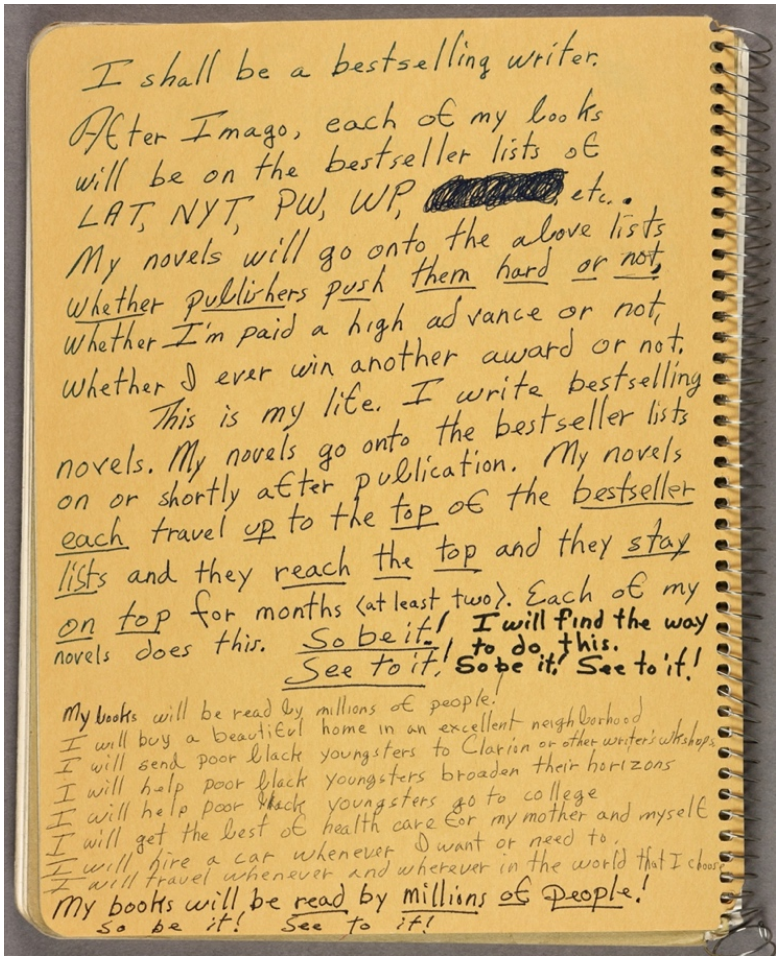

Fig 4 Octavia E. Butler, note to self (date unknown, possibly c.1984), From the collection of Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens

As a group, we discussed how Butler's text provided space for us to speculate about her life at that time, and the role of will in creating her future. Butler declares that she will be a best-selling author, 'whether publishers push them (her books) hard or not.' She describes a future where she is able to hire a car 'whenever I want or need to' and provide the best of healthcare for herself and her mother. In this imagined future, Butler's books are so successful that she is able to provide opportunities for 'poor black youngsters' to – amongst other things - attend the famed Clarion Workshop, a highly competitive and influential Science Fiction and Fantasy writers workshop in California. Butler anticipates: 'this is my life' (all Butler, date unknown, possibly c.1984.)

By framing this workshop around Butler's note to herself (Fig 4), as opposed to her published work, my aim was to personalise (and politicise, inasmuch as the personal is the

political) this act of world building as a construction of self and community. The openness of the personal note has also created space for workshop participants and students (I often use this note as a teaching tool) to include their own subject positions within an imagined future. Throughout the note, Butler returns to the refrain, 'So Be It! See to it!' (Butler, date unknown, possibly c.1984) reinforcing the idea that the future – or at least, her future - is hers to make. As mentioned earlier, Butler did become a NYC bestseller author, during the tumultuous year of 2020, and a scholarship in her name exists for 'writers of colour' to attend the Clarion workshop15.

Discussions of these texts provided an opportunity for the group to connect their subject positions with the broader concept of the future. I found this worked as an effective mechanism to facilitate a sense of openness, which in turn facilitated the rest of the workshop.

Participants were invited to self-select one of three possible time periods – the present moment, fifty years into the future and seven generations into the future16 by moving themselves to areas in the space that were dedicated to each.

In their respective temporal groups, participants we then asked to project themselves into that time frame and to envisage what kind of future they would like to be in existence then. This might entail the state of our planet, human-animal relations, advances in technology, social advances or any other matter of interest.

After 30 minutes, the groups were invited to report back to each other, and discuss the experience of projecting into the future. Collectively, we explored ways to connect these futures together – could our imagined futures be generative? For example, if we aspired to a less violent world fifty years in the future would it be prudent to start implementing meditation and conflict resolution classes into the education system now? What future

15 Administered by the Carl Brandon Society, available here: https://carlbrandon.org/wp-content/cache/supercache/carlbrandon.org/butler-scholarship/index.html {Last accessed: 22nd July 2021}
16 A generation is estimated to be an average of 25 years. Devine, Donn. *How Long is A Generation?* Available at: https://isogg.org/wiki/How_long_is_a_generation%3F_Science_provides_an_answer {Last accessed 29/6/21}

might a generation of children accustomed to self-regulating their emotions and seeking non-violent solutions in their everyday lives create? What kind of politics might they demand?

It is useful to include the work of academic Gerry Canavan here. Canavan was the first academic to gain full access to Butler's archive at the Huntington Library, and his text "The Octavia Butler Papers" (Canavan, 2015) is an instructive introduction to the archive. Canavan discusses Butler's unfinished drafts for what would have been the third Parables book, *Parable of the Trickster*, which was never completed. Butler was working through some ideas about the 'Children of Bow,' the descendants of the 'Earthseed' community who in this version became 'a line of futurity for human beings leading to multiple futures (and multiple humanities) on multiple planets' (Canavan, 2015). This section about generations is striking, 'Butler noted that the difference between Earth and the screaming Children of Bow—four generations—was the same temporal distance between slavery and her own Baby Boomer birth, suggesting that the radical difference of that future might not be so monstrous after all' (Canavan 2015.)

I was thrilled to uncover this, to know that Butler had also undertaken this temporal detective work (I found Canavan's text several years after the workshop) and realised how close this seemingly far future (or past) actually was. One of the ways in which I encouraged participants to imagine this temporal intimacy, was to consider the fact that seven generations ago my family in the Caribbean would have been enslaved, that the telephone was only invented in 1876 (five generations), that women only got the vote in the UK in 1918 (four generations).

The Jamboree version led us to conversations around ecology, robot companions, a world free of war and want and human relations to nature and technology. It was broadly utopic in nature; there was a sense that the world would improve. At the end of the three-hour session, the group ambled out into the grounds for lunch, onto the next workshop, talk or experiment. In subsequent years I have been contacted or tagged on social media by several participants as they quote Butler ('So be it! See to it!') or reflect on an insight that arose during the workshop. It was generative, in the most generous sense.

I also provided this workshop in the USA during an artist residency at The Luminary gallery in St Louis, Missouri. I was curious about what affect the change of context might have on how the workshop functioned, what adjustments might need to be made and what I could learn from the experience about the potential of futurity. For context, St Louis has been ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in the USA for several decades; according to the most recent FBI statistics it was the second most dangerous city in the United States in 2019 (cbsnews.com, 2020)17

During my St Louis workshop, the (considerably smaller) group of eight participants were largely artist-activists directly working within the context of this violence and its effect on the community; a few of them were also anti police violence organisers. This information is relevant as it became clear that the impact of the social conditions of the location – in contract to the bucolic English countryside environment of Dartington Hall – has a profound impact on participants conceptual space to even imagine the kind of utopic futures envisioned previously.

In order to be more responsive to the environment, I wanted to avoid basing the workshop around European theory. Instead, I used Butler's note again, an image of my passport and an image of the Hackney Peace Carnival Mural (1985)18 located on Dalston Lane in my home borough of Hackney, London. Created by artist Ray Walker, the mural depicts Hackney's Peach Carnival of 1983, featuring a multi-racial group of revellers. It has become arguably a classic example of multi-cultural street art. I wanted to bring examples from my own community and to encourage more personal connections, as opposed to theoretical ones.

As it was a small group, we worked through each time period together, taking a break between each section. It proved more challenging for this group to imagine far into the

17 CBS News' source data is the FBI document *Crime in the United States* (2019), a comprehensive database and breakdown of the FBI methodology - available at: https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/violent-crime {Last accessed 29/6/21}

18 The mural was commissioned as part of the GLC Year for Peace in 1982. The London Mural Preservation Society has a detailed right up of the mural's inception and restoration on their website. Available at: http://londonmuralpreservationsociety.com/murals/Hackney-Peace-Carnival-Mural/ {Last accessed 1/7/21}

future, with more time spent in the contemporary moment and near future. They were understandably influenced by the urgency of the moment. This was unsurprising as the environment was so intense, so fraught with violence, iniquitous structures and the emotional demands of the continuous, unrelenting need for activism.

The desires projected onto the future seemed to me to be comparatively modest – one participant wanted her grandchildren to have access to free healthcare in the future. Another wanted abortion to be easily available on demand.

I found this humbling – these were all social conditions I could take for granted in Western Europe. Yet, in the world's supposed superpower, in the wake (to echo Christina Sharpe, 2016) of the nearby Ferguson uprising[19] which erupted in 2014, my everyday conditions back home were much hoped for wishes for the future. St Louis was where Berardi's theory manifested itself most clearly to me as a material reality, and where Butler's unwillingness to produce simple solutions and happy endings made most sense.

It is notable that a small number of real-life groups have arisen, inspired by Butler's work, in particular the 'Earthseed' movement central to the *Parables* series. Lisbeth Grant-Britton describes an 'assortment of fledgling intentional communities that count Butler as one of, if not their major inspiration.' Grant-Britton interviews a founder of one of these movements, SolSeed, a white man by the name of Brandon C. S. Sanders who describes his 'completely Butler-inspired online alliance… "working out what it means to live our shared truth, beauty, and values" '(Grant-Britton, 2013, p188.) Grant-Britton weaves the connections between previous intentional communities including the Quakers and 1960s ecotopia's to nascent movements like SolSeed (and by inference, Butler's work.) She describes Butler's 'thinly-veiled ventriloquism' spurring readers into 'having a greater sense of community and commitment' (Grant-Britton, 2013, p188.)

19 The Ferguson Uprising, also referred to as the Ferguson riots or protests depending on the source, arose out of the police killing of Michael Brown, a young Black man in Ferguson Missouri began in August 2014 and continued in at least three significant waves for over a year. Ferguson and St Louis are twelve miles apart.

Reflecting on the *Seven Generations* workshop model, I am struck by the ways in which I myself have ventriloquised Butler, and how connections made through Butler make communities of choice – or intentional communities, to quote Grant-Britton – possible through art. Of how far Butler's note to herself, "So Be It! See To It!" has allowed me to travel, for my work to expand and connect with people I would not have thought possible, because of my own lapse in imagination. Butler's influence on my practice is mutable, generative and generous and through what she has taught me I have had the opportunity to share this ethos with others, and to expand the possibilities of my practice.

Impact on artists

Butler's influence extends in ways expressed at the start of this chapter. Here, I provide further details of previous, ongoing and upcoming projects within visual culture more broadly that are influenced by - or interpretations of Butler's work – and reference some key visual artists who I posit are working in related fashion.

Podcasts and webinars

Activist and author adrienne maree brown and musician Toshe Reagon co-host *Octavia's Parables,* (2020 -) an ongoing podcast series. Starting with *The Parables of the Sower* Reagon and brown present a chapter-by-chapter exploration of all of Butler's published works.

According to the project website, the podcast 'summarizes the storyline, places it in strategic context for those intending to change the world and provides questions to help bring Butler's ideas to life' (readingoctavia.com, 2021.)

Similarly, the *Octavia Tried to Tell Us* (2020 -) webinar series, Prof. Monica A. Coleman (University of Delaware) and notable science fiction author Tananarive Due host a monthly, free webinar series that utilizes Butler's work to explore a range of contemporary issues, departing from a position of Butler's work having warned us about the calamities facing the earth, but also the potential for change. They have joined by a different guest speaker from the world of science fiction, academia or activism each month; I have attended a few of these events and found them to be hugely enjoyable, thought-provoking and inspiring.

Performance

Toshe Reagon, alongside their mother Bernice Johnson Reagon (Sweet Honey on the Rock), is librettist, composer and musical director of the opera 'Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower' (2017-), which was commissioned by The Public theatre and co-commissioned by The Arts Centre at NYC Abu Dhabi.

I had the pleasure of watching a broadcast of the performance at Abu Dhabi (2017), with the players in their everyday clothing. The experience relied upon the power of the vocal performance and instrumentalization, without the drama of the set, for its power. As librettist, composer and performer, Reagon proved to be a mesmerising presence within an accomplished ensemble and the performance was incredibly moving.

Small screen and streaming adaptations

There are a number of Butler adaptations that are due for imminent production or pre-production at time of writing. They include:

- A television series based on Damien Duffy and John Dennings' award-winning graphic novel realisation *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017) for the FX channel
- A streaming adaptation of *Wild Seed* (1980) for Amazon Studios, produced by JuVee Productions (Viola Davis and Julius Tennon). This series is co-written by notable speculative fiction author Nnedi Okorafor and Wanuri Kahiu.
- Amazon is also behind the adaptation of *Dawn* (1987) by director Ava Duvernay 's production company ARRAY Filmworks and director Victoria Mahoney – the series has received a script-to-series order.

It is notable that it has required the presence of powerful Black production company heads to finally get Butler's work commissioned for the screen, and additionally that they are all being made within the same time frame. One can anticipate an explosion of Butler-related content for the small screen, and the generation of a new audience for her work.

Visual artists

In addition to my works discussed in this chapter, my project *Into the Future!* also took inspiration from Butler, and additionally the publication *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, as described in The Uses of Design Fiction chapter page 153.

Other artists I suggest are influenced by Butler include Jacolby Satterwhite (1986-) whose digital works in particular explore the body, cross species sexuality and human-machine relations using Black bodies in a distinctly queer way. I can see Butler's genetic experiments and the fluidity of Butler's sexual relations in his work.

Larry Achiampong also appears to be influence by Butler, especially in his world building and storytelling, which combines the epic with the mundane. I am thinking specifically of his work using video and gaming technologies, as well as more recent work such as his 'Relic Traveller' (2017 -) video works, which utilise the English landscape as a space for a diaristic approach to Black futurity within the context of family relations.

Returning to the Otolith Group, their international touring exhibition, *Xenogenesis* (2019 -) is named after one of Butler's series of novels. As I mention at the beginning of this text, the Otolith Group were responsible for introducing me to Butler, and they have consistently engaged with her work and ideas since their founding, through exhibitions and public events.

This is not an exhaustive list of artists inspired by Butler's work and ideas, but these examples are provided an indication of the context my work is being produced within, the practitioners I place myself and conversation with, and an example of the enduring legacy of Butler's comparatively modest output.

Butler's influence extends to the work of science and indeed out to the stars – a mountain on Pluto,[20] a Mars rover landing site[21] and a main belt asteroid[22] are named after her. In contemplation of these facts, I find myself thinking about her character 'Lauren' from *Parable of the Sower*, who was also initially misunderstood, but whose mission was in fact completed – in all its complications – upon her death. Octavia tried to tell us, yes, but also 'So Be It! See to It!'

20 The International Astronomical Union named the moon 'Butler Mons' after a public call for suggestions in 2018,

21 NASA named a Mars Perseverance rover landing site "Octavia E. Butler Landing" in 2021.

22 American astronomer Eleanor Helin 'discovered' the asteroid at Palomar Conservatory in 1988. It is called Asteroid 7052 Octaviabutler. Available at: https://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/sbdb.cgi?sstr=2007052 {Last accessed 22nd July 2021}

METHODOLOGY

This methodology chapter lays out the nature of my research-based practice and the autoethnographic praxis that form the basis of this thesis. I examine my position as an artist, the contingent forms that shape that position, and the work that results from that. I explore why I utilise Octavia Butler as a key point of reference, as well as my early interest in Franco Beradi and the enduring importance of Ursula Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986). I expand upon how these thinkers – particularly Butler - underpin my work, alongside how processing my lived experience impacts my practice.

I present a timeline of the last decade of my practice, from working within the context of so-called 'socially engaged practice' to my current exhibition-based solo practice. Furthermore, I explain my rejection of certain terminologies circulating within the expanded field of speculative praxis that were not adequate for my purposes – such as *Afrofuturism* (Derry, 1994) and propose new terms I have developed as a result – the extant *aPOCalypso* and current *Dark Fecundity*.

Literature Review

This thesis is in conversation with a range of artists, theorists and other cultural producers engaged with questions around Black futurity. This literature review considers key texts, ideas and movements in cultural theory, radical organising and artistic practice working towards articulating futurities that displaced white, male, hegemonic systems and centre Global Majority subjectivities.

Arguably, the genesis of the critical discourses most relevant to this thesis is a reckoning with the term *Afrofuturism* (Derry, 1993), as described in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* and the subsequent discourse between figures such as Alondra Nelson and Kodwo Eshun during the 1990s. Derry's configuration is explicitly relating to African American themes and concerns within speculative fiction, particularly that which utilises technology. For Derry, Afrofuturism is created by African American's – an assertion that has been tested not only by the work of non-American Black people, but also by the attempt to

incorporate non-Black people into the rubric of Afrofuturism, such as in the exhibition *The Shadows Took Shape* (2013) at The Studio Museum in Harlem which explored contemporary art 'through the lens of Afrofuturist aesthetics' featuring artist of Palestinian, European and Arab heritage alongside African and African American artists.) Here Afrofuturism is an aesthetic project, not necessarily a political one. Many theorists within this discussion also substitute African American for Black more generally (Jackson, Moody-Freeman, 2011), but without addressing the cultural specificities of non-American Blackness. In this sense, Black is a synonym for African American – I would argue notions of cultural plurality are largely contingent.

Afrofuturism 2.0 (Anderson, Johns, 2016) builds on the work of Derry, in those early conversations about Afrofuturism in response to the emergence of social media and what the authors refer to as an 'early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity.' However, it is arguable that this configuration has not been taken up more broadly – the term Afrofuturism is still erroneously used to describe most futurist cultural production by Black artists. Afrofuturism 2.0 is somewhat inert as a theoretical framework, and maintains Afrofuturism's emphasis on African American practices, which is less useful to my project.

Considerations of how to apply critical thought on Black futurities beyond Afrofuturism can be found in terms such as *otherhood* (Lavender, 2004, 2011) which addresses science fictions tendency to discuss race without explicitly mentioning race. Lavender offers otherhood as a tool for reading race within science fiction. Similarly the notion of *Black space* (Nama, 2008) considers how race is coded within science fiction film specifically, with Blackness presented as subtext, not context. Nama demonstrates the 'structured absence' and 'token presence' of Black characters and the role of allegory as a tool for the negation of an actual Black presence. Whilst both have some relevance to my project as generative ways of thinking through concerns regarding existing questions of race and representation within science and speculative fiction, my focus is on articulating what I want to produce and see.

The potentiality of *emergence*, (brown, 2017) emphasises 'critical connections over critical mass' as a methodology for creating generative connections particularly through study of

fractals, intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralisation, and is non- linear and iterative. brown's praxis provides a somewhat useful prism through which to consider the ways in which my practice and research coalesce into art, and productively proposes models of community that many other theories of Black futurity lack.

Italian philosopher Franco Berardi (2011) proposes that late capitalism has caused the collapse of the collective ability to imagine alternative possible futures, described as a 'reversal' of the future. Beradi tries to find hope but posits that such action prevents him (and us) from truly seeing the present, that 'evolution is not progressive' (Beradi, 2011). Whilst Beradi's initial prognosis is instructive in analysing the present day, his project neglects the possibilities proposed by radical, pleasure based anti-colonial criticality such as that proposed by brown and Imirisha (2015), particularly their articulation of 'visionary fiction' (Imirisha, 2015), decolonial speculative fiction that is purposefully designed to build more socially just worlds.

aPOCalypso and *Dark Fecundity* also exist within the context of other Global Majority futurisms, although these futurisms often express specific geo-political contexts. I am thinking here of *Sinofuturism* (popularised by artist Laurence Lek, 2017), which uses the context of China's industrial scale use of technology to consider relations between human / non-human intelligence, *Gulf Futurism* (Al Maria, 2012), through which artist Sophia Al Maria critiques the rapid expansion of Gulf Arab technocratic hyper-capitalism as a form of cultural construction, doomed to failure as resources expire. Indigenous or Native American Futurism is often contentious, as some argue that Indigenous American cultures are more concerned with preserving the past; that the notion of privileging the future is inherently 'white.' Nonetheless, this term is often used to describe futuristic cultural production by Native American artists in particular, and additionally to Aboriginal Australian inspired speculative fictions, for example that depicted in the television series *Cleverman* (ABC Australia, 2016-.)

Black Futurity in visual culture

Here, I highlight some of the artists working within a similar conceptual space that my work operates within, as a way of demonstrating the ongoing conversations around Blackness and futurity within contemporary visual art practice.

Larry Achiampong's work encompasses moving image, performance, collage and installation. His *Relic Traveller* series (2017 -) arises from a 'postcolonial perspective informed by technology, agency and the body, and narratives of migration' (Achiampong, 2017.) Achiampong's earlier work (with David Blandy) often utilised game engine technology to create fictional landscapes for expansive storytelling. In *A Lament for Power* (Achiampong, Blandy, 2020) the artists also incorporated the story of HeLa cells in a video installation about the 'complex relationship between science, politics and race in our age of avatars, video gaming and DNA Ancestry testing' (Blandy, 2020).

In Kapwani Kiwanga's (b.1978-) *Afrogalactica* (2012 -) - an ongoing performance work that includes live reading, video and sound – the artist casts herself as a fictional anthropologist from the future (reminiscent of Eshun, 2003). Kiwanga reimagines Afrofuturism as 'a means to examine African subjectivity and undermine hegemonic discourse' (EMPAC, 2018). Unlike my practice, Kiwanga utilises the existing language of Afrofuturism, incorporating African subjectivities within its framework. Similar to the…*And Beyond Institute for Future Research (2014 – 2018)* and *Hailing Frequencies Open (2018-)*, Kiwanga fuses fact and fiction to reconfigure the Black present and future.

The work of *Black Quantum Futurism* – a project of Camae Ayewa (Moor Mother) and Rasheeda Phillips (2015 -) - positions itself as a new approach to 'living and experiencing reality' by manipulating space-time 'in order to see into possible futures, and/or collapse space-time into a desired future in order to bring about that future's reality' (all quotes BQF, 2020.) BQF work is multivarious – including what might be referred to as 'socially engaged practice,' music, installation and publishing. I would place BQF work in the category of classic Afrofuturism, although also related to the activism of brown and Imirisha.

Artist Martine Syms' (b.1988) *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* (2013) proposes a more down to earth approach to Black futurity, rejecting what Syms perceives as a futile, romantic imperative to connect Black people to the stars. Syms is not engaged with the Pan

Africanism of Kiwanga, BQF or Achiampong, as evidenced by her statement that 'an all-black crew is unlikely,' referring to the idea of a Black astronaut corps. (That such a thing would be more than likely within the context of an African Space Programme does not occur within this framework). The manifesto lists things that Mundane Afrofuturists rejoice in, such as 'jive talking aliens and the relief of recognizing our authority,' calling for a move away from the scientific and the factual (which, it claims, have been utilised by white supremacy) and a focus on 'emotionally true, vernacular reality' (all Syms, 2013.) The Manifesto closes with a list of promises (no interstellar travel, as travel within this solar system is expensive and difficult etc.) Whilst I find Syms' work fascinating, our concept of what form Black futurities might take – and which futures are worth pursuing conceptually – are quite opposite.

Another key influence is Ursula Le Guin's and her proposal for reimaging the history of storytelling as a form of collecting. In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986) Le Guin draws on anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's (b.1945) work on human evolution (1975), undermining the primacy of the singular, male hero to instead proposes the receptacle – the carrier bag of the title – as the preeminent tool of our collective ancestors. This early technology, Le Guin posits, allowed for essential goods to be shared, freed the hands of parents tending the young and offers a route into a more feminist conception of the story of humanity. Le Guin suggests this liberates her humanity - no longer estranged from the story of the singular, male hero. She proposes, 'the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag' (Le Guin, 1986), the story as a container. Le Guin's proposal compliments Octavia Butler's methodology and research process, as discussed in interviews where Butler describes the breadth of her research from Greek and Yoruba mythology, taking trips to the Amazon, morning walks and the life cycle of algae (Harper, 1997.) Butler's magpie-like approach in turn inspires brown and Imirisha (2015) to invite activists, writers and others to imagine fictional futures as Butler's metaphorical descendants. I address Butler's pivotal influence on my work below.

My research draws upon – or is in conversation with – multitudinal configurations of possible futures circulating within visual art, literature and culture more broadly, critical liberation and activist studies as well as philosophy. Working within this context provides useful, generative tools to consider how and where I place my work in critical conversation.

The ideas of *aPOCalypso* and *Dark Fecundity* – explored in greater detail below – arise from the necessity of finding a form of language that allows for a specific conversation around Black womanhood, reproducibility and futurity that draw upon the distant and mythological past, the iniquitous (and more recent), relationship between Black women's bodies and medical science and the radical possibilities offered by speculative fiction. In that sense these concepts represent an attempt at occupying past, present and future – and fact and fiction - simultaneously. Dark Fecundity's endless expansion, positioning Darkness as a place of continuous rebirth, suggests a future that is constantly under construction and mutable.

aPOCalypso

Fig 5 ABIFR (2017), *Infomercial* (CJSS) [Video still]. (Credit: ABIFR).

The impulse to create a taxonomy of Black futurity compatible with my own subjectivity and aspirations arose out of a profound dissatisfaction with the work Afrofuturism was not able to do for my practice, as referenced in the earlier in this chapter.

Between 2016 – 2018 I tested the term *aPOCalypso* as a theoretical framework in which Black futurities could be explored. Here, I will trace the origins and use of the term and articulate why it no longer serves this purpose in my practice.

aPOCalypso is a portmanteau of Afro (as in, African), POC (as in, people of colour) and Calypso (to denote a Caribbean, creolised origin). *aPOCalypso* was less concerned with Afrofuturism's project of 'recovery' (Eshun, 2003), instead creating a refracted sense of *what is* and *what could* be simultaneously, in order to bring about what I called the *post-recovery*. In other words, in order to create the possibility of a culture that is no longer in the position of recovering from enslavement and colonialism, such a future needed to be actively imagined as a possibility.

aPOCalypso was my attempt to address the limitations of *Afrofuturism*, specificity through my subject position as a Black British person of predominately African and Asian Caribbean origin, within a theoretical schema that I contest privileges perspectives from the USA. *aPOCalypso* rejected Afrofuturism's inherent Afro-Americanism to encompass perspectives from elsewhere in the African diaspora – notably the descendants of the Caribbean.[23] *aPOCalypso* was devised to be playful, and additionally to hold the tension that comes with the ever-changing minoritizing language used to describe people of the Global South in the so-called West, particularly in the United Kingdom.

With retrospect, *aPOCalypso* had an inbuilt conceptual obsolescence for a number of reasons, most obviously because whilst trying to find a taxonomy that related more specifically to my own cultural background, I employed an Americanism ('People of Colour') that had no real purchase in terms of my own subject formation - it holds no historical value for me as a British person. (I do not employ the term 'People of Colour' in my everyday life.) At some point a new terminology was always going to supersede 'POC,' rendering it meaningless, or at least an anachronism. There is also uncertainty over terminologies of Blackness in the UK, and what I assert as the ongoing search for an inclusive terminology of and for minoritized people post the diminution (if not outright rejection) of political Blackness as a construct.

23 This idea was further expanded upon during my performance lectures *aPOCalypso: an Introduction* at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, September 2016, and *aPOCalypso* at IniVa, London 25th May 2017.

Britain historically has – in contrast to the USA – used the term 'Black' in a political sense, denoting people who are minoritized within society due to what used to be referred to as 'colour prejudice.' Theorists and activists including Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby, Sarah Ahmed and A. Sivanandan are amongst those who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the historical deployment of political Blackness. It is worth noting that even in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) – a book about the role of the Middle Passage in the formation of 'modernity - Gilroy uses the example of the threat to the life of author Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses,* to demonstrate ideas around race, nationality and belonging (Gilroy, 1993, p10). For this generation of theorists, political Blackness was intrinsic. Another example of this phenomenon is the activist group *Southall Black Sisters* (1979 -), which serves women of South Asian descent. Arising out of the era of political Blackness SBS has not changed its name to fit the current fashion for the term POC – its name carries its particular legacy, which speaks to the history of politically Black activism in the UK.

In her paper *Breaking black: the death of ethnic and racial studies in Britain*, Claire Alexander explores the 'transformation and fragmentation of political blackness' (Alexander, 2017). Alexander suggests British Blackness can be understood in two phases, from the 1960's to mid 1980's, then mid 1980's to the early 2000s. Alexander describes the early part of the first phase as *a '*political mobilization for migrants' (in the 1960s)*,* followed by the 'solidarity and resistance' (both Alexander, 2017), suspicious of ethnicity and its roots in divide and rule colonialism (in the 1970s). Alexander traces the fracture of this identification from the mid 1980s onwards, as the specificities of different Asian cultural and religious identities began to gain greater prominence, alongside the *'global circulation of hypermodern black identities centred on the US'* (Alexander, 2017), which I am largely in agreement with. Hence the emergence of the term POC, or the more recent usage of 'black and brown' or Global Majority.

Gilroy is alert to the 'pronounced generational features' (1993:86), of the retreat from political blackness, the commonality defined by its 'reference to the central, irreducible sign of …common racial subordination – the colour black' to a fragmentation into 'various constituent elements' (both 1992:86.) He proposes that what he refers to as 'Africentrism' is

a ‘totalising conception of black culture…powerful because it corresponds to no actually existing black communities.’ (1993:87). Here, Gilroy is referencing the early / mid-90’s turn to forms of Afrocentrism that often posited a connection to Ancient Nile Valley or other Ancient African cultures, a romanticised vision of a mythic Africa that (by Gilroy’s reckoning) many confused second generation descendants of Caribbean migrants to the UK adopted (conveniently side-stepping the realities of contemporary Africa.) I was a teenager during this time – Gilroy’s assessment is unnecessarily harsh, in my opinion. What we see here is a melancholic resistance to a new generation’s formative subjectivity, that replaced the romanticism of unstable Afro-Asian unity with an attempt at a configuration of non-hegemonic Blackness that connected across the Black Atlantic, and across space and time. It is no coincidence that these formulations were occurring just as Afrofuturism was gaining traction – distanced from the immigrant narrative, the locus of this question of belonging shifted.

Indeed, in his text on the destabilization of political blackness from a South Asian perspective, Tariq Mahmood notes that ‘sociologists have been... at the forefront of this development, and amongst the slowest to abandon it (1994:860.) The retreat from political Blackness came from below, not above and in concert with an adoption of more avowedly Islamic identities for many South Asian Brits (as well as the notorious ‘Don’t freak, I’m a Sikh’ slogan T-shirts, distancing non-Muslims from Muslims, which were widely reported on post 9/11[24]. Mahmood - who regards hegemonic Blackness as ‘harmful to Asians’ (1994:863) as it distorts their specific needs - also reminds us that the Commission for Racial Equality recommended ceasing use of hegemonic ‘black’ back in 1988. I include Mahood’s analysis here to make the point that the rejection of political Blackness came from people from all communities, not just (or even predominantly) the academy.

In Britain, the search for an encompassing terminology for people of African, Asian and Caribbean descent morphed into more bureaucratic language, most notoriously BAME (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic), which was previously BME (Black Minority Ethnic.) I first

24 For example: Pal Sian, Katy, (2010) “Don’t Freak I’m Sikh!”. Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives (pp. 251-254). Hurst Publishers.

encountered this term when I was told – by a white curator – that BAME is what I was now. This anecdote illustrates the essential problem with the term – it is not ours. The think tank British Future produced research into the term BAME,[25] less than half of 'ethnic minority' respondents 'felt confident that they know what 'BAME' means' meanwhile less than a third did not recognise the term at all (online, 2021). Meanwhile fewer than half found 'People of colour' acceptable, with non-white even less so.

Further resistance to BAME can be found in online campaigns and there is even a podcast, 'Not BAME'[26] which looks at politics and news from African diasporic perspectives.

The British Futures research revealed a desire to move away from hegemonic language and instead to engage with the specificity of different cultures and communities. The aforementioned Global Majority[27] has also gained considerable traction and is increasing in use across both sides of the Atlantic; it is now my preferred term.

Communicating the concept of *aPOCalypso*

aPOCalypso was introduced in public settings during talks, performances and presentations. Below is the publicity blurb for a performance lecture I gave at Iniva in 2017:

> Afrofuturism has reached a functional and conceptual obsolescence, requiring the development of a new terminology to describe emergent speculative, futurist and technocultural Afro-diasporic aesthetics, from Europe and the Caribbean as well as the USA.

25 According to British Future, they interviewed 2,000 'ethnic minority' respondents and 1,500 'white British' respondents for this research.
26 Available at: https://www.thecockpit.org.uk/show/not_bame_podcast. [Last accessed 1/8/21].

27 In researching the origins of Global Majority, I have discovered that leadership consultant Rosemary Campbell Stephens MBE credits herself with developing the term between (2003- 2011) in her text *Global Majority; Decolonising the language and Reframing the Conversation about Race (2020).*

> How do we begin to describe a Black future that encompasses a greater diversity of diasporic influence and reference, as a means of decolonising the future imaginary?
>
> Artist Sonya Dyer proposes the term aPOCalypso.

I replicated the hype that 'new' academic ideas within the global discourse on Blackness can generate as part of the work; the above blurb is somewhat dramatic. This fed into the performative notion of the lectures, which utilised found images, clips from television shows and films to compliment my theorisation. These performances were an instructive way for me to work through the idea of *aPOCalypso* and it is through this work that I realised the term was not quite right (Fig 6).

aPOCalypso attempted to describe is an aesthetic in visual culture that speaks to a hybridised Black futurity, acting as a sentinel, seeking out a post-recovery aesthetic of Black futurity.

This was a very generative time, however, and I appreciate the playfulness that *aPOCalypso* made space for in my work. I posed the question to myself, could I make this make sense? The fact that ultimately it did not fulfil its promise was for me part of the embrace of potential failure that comes with practice.

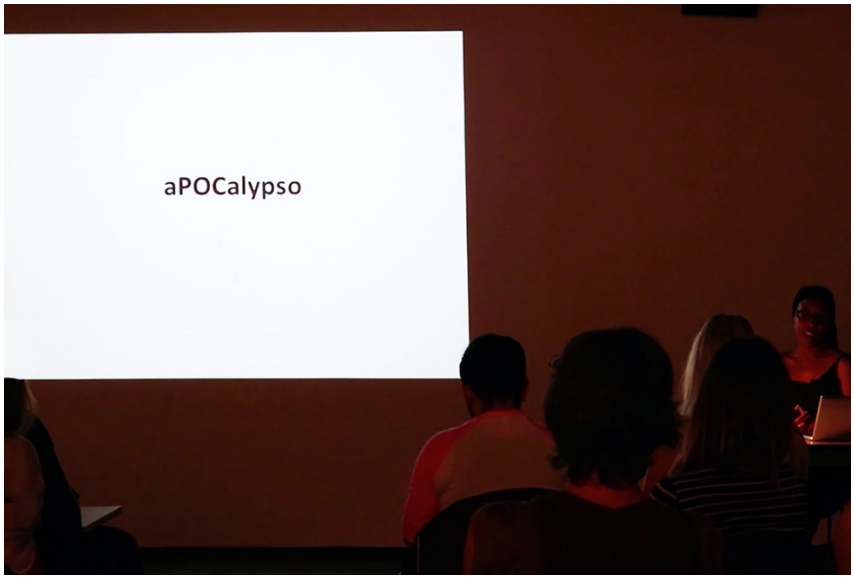

Fig 6. ABIFR (2016), *aPOCalypso: an introduction*. [Documentation] Performance lecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (Credit: ABIFR).

Whilst *aPOCalypso* is – for my purposes - an extant taxonomy, it was a generative and useful framework that provided space for me to test the ideas of how to use language to stake a claim to the territory of critical Black futurity. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that it led me to a deeper engagement with my key concerns around Blackness, futurity and the need for a language that encompassed my own subject position. During this period of time, I became even more intimate with the tribology of influences that form the key components of Hailing Frequencies Open, and indeed began to employ this phrase as a cornerstone of my practice. *aPOCalypso* felt too lightweight, too insubstantial for the demands my practice and ideas were making of me. I began to realise that Darkness, not blackness, offered a more artistically liberating and politically cogent frame of reference in which my ideas could flourish.

What is Dark Fecundity?

Dark Fecundity, as I envisage it, is a way to articulate a version of Black Futurity predicated on notions of Black creative hyper reproductivity and the infinite vastness of Space. It plays on the notion of Blackness as a racial and social construct as a synonym for darkness, and repositions darkness as something generative, as opposed to something inherently negative.

That is to suggest, *Dark Fecundity* recalls a sense of an endlessly reproducing and mutating potentiality emanating from Blackness in both the racial and astrological sense. It connects Blackness with the vastness of Space, an echo of humanity's origins in Africa – the 'Dark Continent' of colonial myth.

In my conception Darkness is capitalised, to foreground its status – it is a determining factor, as opposed to only functioning as description. Dictionary definitions of Darkness include 'the quality of being without light,' 'being nearer to black than white,' 'being sad and without hope' and 'being evil or threatening' (all Cambridge Dictionary 2021, online); my utilisation of the term brings to light the historical conflation of Blackness and Darkness – of Africa, of deeply pigmented skin and of the vastness of Space. Dictionary definitions are useful to consider as I want to understand how ideas commonly circulate. I also employ the definition of fecundity as the ability to produce or create 'a lot of new things, ideas etc.' (Cambridge

Dictionary 2021, online.) Dark fecundity is therefore the potentiality of new phenomena emerging from a place of Darkness.

Here I will trace the genealogy I developed for the term as I utilise it and demonstrate its application in my practice. I will consider the artistic and political implications of Darkness as it manifests in my work, and in the mythologies, stereotypes and pathologies that are constructed around Blackness as Darkness within Euro-American cultures, including the destructive deployment of related tropes in the justification of the enslavement and colonialism of African diasporic peoples. Christina Sharpe refers to this as 'the singularity of antiblackness' (2016:106), drawing on the kind of scientific language often utilised with speculative fiction, and also as 'the weather, antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate.' What I am drawing attention to here is the persistence and ever-presence of antiblackness, and the possibilities I propose embracing Darkness invites.

I reposition Darkness as a subject position of infinite possibility, and in turn propose a version of Black Futurity that is less focused on escaping the past, and more on adopting a kairotic[28] principle of time, and ultimately futurity.

In a script for video published in her book *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine describes the scene of the racist murder of a Black man named James Craig Anderson. She depicts the vehicle used in the attack as 'a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object' (Rankine, 2015 p93) eliding darkness, blackness, subject and object in a way I find fascinating and evocative.

28 Here I am referring to the Greek concept of *Kairos*, 'the opportune and decisive moment' (Merriam-Webster dictionary, online 2021). Ironically in relation to Sharpe's observation, the modern Greek translation of 'kairos' is 'weather.' Available at: https://translate.google.com/?sl=el&tl=en&text=kairos&op=translate&hl=en [Last accessed 25th August 2021.]

This passage reminds me of what I aim to bring into being with Dark Fecundity and as such I will employ both terms Darkness and Blackness throughout; my aim is to establish their interconnectedness in my work.

Early work

During the early stages of my research, I began to work through ideas of what an anti-colonial Space programme might be.[29] I created a repository of images of women of exclusively or predominately African descent (some of the initial images included women of Asian descent) within space narratives both fictional and from life such as Space scientists and astronauts. The impulse was to create a visual register wherein the centre was located with them, and not with the white male figures that are usually the face of science and Space exploration. I acknowledge that Black people can also be the face of Empire, nonetheless, divorced from their origins (belonging to specific Space programmes, or time periods) I attempted to create for myself an alternative, indexical image bank of references.

Fig. 7 ABIFR (2015) *Manifest Destiny* [Documentation]. Taken from performance lecture at Nottingham Cotemporary. (Credit: ABIFR)

I wanted to collate these images just for myself, to be able to see evidence of these women's existence as inspiration for my work and thinking (Fig 7). As my practice matured

29 Many of these works are discussed in the Design Fiction and Think Tank chapters..

beyond the lecture format, I found I no longer had need for these existing images and became disenchanted with replicating and repurposing existing visions of space travel and the future. I became increasingly excited about developing my own vision. This sensibility coalesced around my decision to work with the trilogy of influences Hailing Frequencies Open arises from– I had found the spark that ignited my ability to create my own narratives.

However, as a critical and artistic device, this early repository was a nascent development of Dark Fecundity – a generative, expansive repository.

A brief history of Darkness

In order to understand Dark Fecundity, let us consider the social and political value (or lack thereof) of Darkness / Blackness as a phenomenological category, starting with the Abrahamic religions. My aim is to demonstrate why I conflate the terms, and how the notion of Dark Fecundity is integral to my practice, specifically the work that forms the practice element of my thesis.

To be clear, my choices are intentional – I focus here on interpretations of Christian texts (and to a lesser extent, Islamic) formations of racial Blackness as expressed during respective colonial endeavours as this is representative of my methodological process and critical practice. I contend that the effect of these early formations are foundational to my construction of Blackness as Darkness. In attempting an account of Dark Fecundity, I want to be true to the origins of my process, my methodology, which is critically engaged with *mythologies* of Blackness and Darkness within the colonising (and colonised) imagination. I will also reflect on ideas arising from the Enlightenment period, which is later in the chronology of European race formation. This section is not attempting to be a complete history of Blackness – that would take up another thesis entirely. Instead, I theorise a mythology of Blackness as influenced by the consistent, often implicit, sometimes underreported religiosity that frames (and was used to justify) the colonial project, and thus racial hierarchies, specifically the value (or lack thereof) of Blackness, and the abjection of Darkness. I am inspired by Katherine McKittrick's notion of 'methodology as an act of disobedience and rebellion' (2021:35.) What I am interested in is the primal root of anti-Blackness.

Within the Christian theology that underpins the construction of the society I exist within – that of the United Kingdom[30] – Darkness is fundamental to the beginning of time and life itself. In the King James version of the Christian bible, in the beginning, the earth was 'formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep..' and God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness..' (Genesis1:3). The bible has other references to light / dark including, 'For God, who said: "Let light shine out of darkness," made His Light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6.)

I want to hold onto this reference to light emanating out of darkness and the separation of light from darkness as we move forward; I will demonstrate that it is key to understanding the conception of Darkness that my work pushes against.

The Curse of Ham

If the Christian bible advocates the idea of light being connected to knowledge (in this case, of their God), how does Darkness as Blackness manifest itself within the text? And how has this impacted the material existence of Dark / Black people?

Progressive and Black radical theologians have long advocated that the curse of Ham has been wilfully misrepresented within Christianity for millennia, not least Dr Martin Luther King Jr. in his sermon 'Paul's Letter to American Christians' in 1956, where he described it as 'blasphemy' (webarchive.com)[31].

My intention here is not to relitigate the torturous tentacles of mythology, scriptural misinterpretation and the deliberate conflation of Blackness and enslavement and

30 For example, the head of State, Queen Elizabeth is also the head of the Church of England; the church, state and monarchy are indelibly interconnected at the seat of symbolic and literal power even in this supposedly secular era.

31 I found this text via the Internet Archive Wayback machine, original source attributed to the Martin Luther King Jr Research and Education Institute at Sanford University. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20131002172102/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_pauls_letter_to_american_christians/ [Last accessed 10th July 2021.]

debasement that has been distributed globally over past thousand years or so, across the Islamic and Christian worlds in particular. Instead, I will, briefly, continue to thread the needle of the foundational construction of Darkness, particularly as it relates to Black people within the so-called West[32].

The most commonly distributed version of the story is that the curse was placed on Ham's son Canaan after Ham saw the naked form of his (most often drunk) father, Noah.

Here I quote from the King James Bible:

[21] And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.
[22] And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without.
[23] And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness.
[24] And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him.
[25] And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.
[26] And he said, Blessed be the **LORD** God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.
[27] God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant**.** (Genesis 9:21 – 27, biblegateway.com)

As is evident, there is no mention of race or ethnicity here. Nonetheless, the common interpretations of the biblical Curse of Ham are widely acknowledged as a source of theological anti-Blackness and was used as a justification for the rightness of the trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans (16th – 19th c). In his comprehensive work, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, David Goldenberg refers to the story as 'the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand

32 In using the term 'former West' I am acknowledging the work undertaken to destabilise the primacy of the 'West' as a hegemonic system. A useful example of this within art practice / critical theory is the project 'Former West' initiated by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Netherlands. Available at: https://formerwest.org [Last accessed 9th July 2021.]

years' (Goldenberg, 2003, p1.) The curse was also used by the Mormon church to justify its refusal to allow Black male priests, which was only rescinded in 1978.

This is also true of the Islamic slave trade that preceded it, beginning in Antiquity and continuing for at least 1300 years. (It is arguable that this trade in African's has not yet ended sue to the contemporaneous slave markets in countries such as Libya[33].) Indeed, the Arabic world *abd* / *abeed / abid* (slave or servant) is routinely used to refer to a person of dark complexion, especially of African origin.

There is evidence that the usage of the term *adb* is increasingly coming under scrutiny from a younger generation of Arabs, many of whom are using social media to facilitate internal community discussions on the issue. I would suggest that much of this activism has arisen from the context BLM (Black Lives Matter) has created for people racialised in the so-called West, under the rubric of 'People of Colour.'

In her article, *A Paler Shade of Black* (2008) Sudanese British writer Nesrine Malik explores the usage of the term within the intimate confines of her family. Malik relates how her Northern Sudanese father's family used it to refer to anyone darker than themselves, to the extent that she did not recognise how derogatory it was until her teenage years, until it was applied to her.

Law Professor and writer Khaled Beydoun ignited an online conversation in 2018 when he proposed to make *abeed*, 'the new n word.' In his original tweet, Beydoun proposes that *abeed* is even more derogatory as it 'holds that Black people are still slaves' (Beydoun, 2018.) An earlier effort in 2014 'drop the A word' called on Arab Americans to desist from using the term to refer to African Americans indicating that the practice had transferred across the Atlantic with the diaspora, something some within a new generation of Arab-descendant people – much like Malik – were unwilling to perpetuate[34].

33 See, for example, Didier, Diof and Lee (2021) The Return of Slavery In Libya. Available at: https://www.growthinktank.org/en/the-return-of-slavery-in-libya/ (Accessed 9th July 2021.)
34 See also, Abdul-Samad, Lina, *Arabs, the N word and the A Word are the same*, (2017). Available at: https://muslimgirl.com/arabs-n-word-word/. (Last accessed 9th July 2021.)

The above demonstrates the way in which the words for Africans or Black people correspond to the word for slave within Arab / Islamic culture and that a common interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the Christian biblical story of the curse of Ham has been used to justify the enslavement of Africans. They both position Blackness as punishment and as *less than*. It is surely neither original nor controversial to state that both practices has had a deleterious impact on the material realities of African descendant people at the point of encounter.

The Enlightenment and Race.

I turn here to consider how the movement known as the Enlightenment might have perpetuated antiBlackness in ways that still resonate today, primarily because the Enlightenment had such a significant impact on the formation of systems of power, governance, personhood as we experience them today.

I am referring to the period of 18th and 19th century European thought which saw the birth of radical ideas around natural sciences, cosmology, philosophy, aesthetics, state and personhood. Initially arising from a loose association of French philosophers (such as Voltaire), the movement expanding most significantly to Scotland (with the likes of Adam Smith and David Hume), Germany (Immanuel Kant) and to the nascent USA.

The Enlightenment proposed a move towards the spirit, rather than the letter of theological scripture, as 'developing natural science renders acceptance of a literal version of the Bible increasingly untenable' (Stanford, 2017) precipitated by a 'crisis of authority' regarding belief that became a 'central characteristic of the Enlightenment spirit' (Stanford, 2017.)

Bill Jenkins' account of the Edinburgh school draws attention to the importance of the reclamation of the Ancient Greek Chain of Being (a third century Neoplatonist conception of the nature of the universe, developed from ideas attributed to Plato and Aristotle), which presented an immovable, hierarchical organisational structure for all life described as the 'dominant metaphor for the natural order among eighteenth-century natural historians' (Jenkins, 2020, p8.) In summary, it presents man as above all inanimate beings, matter and

animals, with man beneath his maker. This system is 'static - the result of divine ordination' (Malik, 1996, p91.) Who then, is man?

Strangely to our current understanding of evolution, the Enlightenment era view was that white men (or, white people) were the first men, and all 'Others' diminished, unfinished reproductions – the further from white, the more degenerate. According to Jenkins' reading of Comte du Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (written between 1749-1804)[35] Buffon believed that humans were 'varieties of the same species which had varied according to their different conditions of life' and almost unanimously, 'white Europeans were regarded as representing the original form of the human species from which all other races had fallen away' by Enlightenment thinkers (2020:16.)

Kenan Malik makes a distinction between the 'Enlightenment understanding of universalism and'…' the Romantic notion of race' (1996:78.) Malik positions himself in contract to scholars such as Said and Peter Fryer by asserting that the view 'of racial superiority that European élite classes felt over non-European society cannot be understood outside of the sense of the inferiority imposed upon the masses at home' (1996:82.) Essentially, Malik asserts that class differences were only later applied to difference in skin colour, which Jenkins disagrees with. Malik's account takes in Arthur Gobineau *Essays on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853)[36] which divided the world into three races, based on social strata and applied to every country – the nobility, bourgeoisie and the common people. Nonetheless, only white people could be 'considered part of history' (1996:83.)

With the Victorian era (1837 – 1901) came scientific racism as we know it today, with the field of phrenology – the study of the shape of the cranium as an indication of character – propagated in the British Isles by figures including Scotland's George Combe and Robert Knox, the latter a keen proponent of racial science. This philosophy determined that 'different groups had diverged, stopped or regressed along the evolutionary path, according

35 According to Jenkins, *Histoire Naturelle* – an early French encyclopaedia – was the first to use 'race.'
36 Malik regards this work as a 'seminal tract of modern racism' (Malik, 1996, p83)

to their racial capacities' so whilst the 'general level of civilisation always advanced, thanks to the progressive nature of the superior races inferior races would never be able to keep up or catch up.' (Malik, 1996, p91).

Scientific racism is explored in greater detail in the *Encyclopaedia* chapter, but it is useful to consider here; allowing for Darwinism fuelled racial sciences creation of 'a dynamic concept of hierarchy' (Malik, 1996, p91) what I propose is an account of the intellectual atmosphere that creating a permission structure the most significant and deleteriously impactful shared experience for African's at this time – the Trans-Atlantic trade in African lives and plantation enslavement in the Caribbean and Americas. According to Enlightenment and immediately post-Enlightenment thought, Black people were defective, inferior copies of the 'true' man, with no history and would never reach their full humanity. Even if individual figures were against enslavement (Jenkins, 2020), with rare exception this belief was most the dominant factor, once race became intertwined with physiology.

The necessary urge to repair the damage of this philosophy is understandable, but McKittrick reminds us to apply great criticality to the norms and associations that are presented as fact, when thinking about biocentric systems (which she critiques as a system of knowledge and knowledge production) that is 'ubiquitously ordinary because it is a habitual and public validation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial biological human differences that move forward in time' (2021:132.) Here, McKittrick is discussing the impact of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment race science, replicating and reproducing. Even when scholarship – such as critical race studies or feminist or antiracist science studies attempts to reckon with this legacy, McKittrick also cautions that such research focusses on 'long-standing prominence of scientific "fact" developed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dominance of the colonial and patriarchal Western knowledge systems and scientific racism' and that the 'black body is the fulcrum of the experimentation, medicalization, study, data collection' (both 2021:131.) This understanding is what is find lacking in Malik's account, although I agree with his general analysis on class and it is indisputable that the so-called 'lower orders' were initially Othered by the ruling classes due to their class position, the Black body – the specific, mythological history of the Black body – holds a position that is pathological in the Western imagination.

The Dark Continent

The perpetuation and conflation between darkness, savagery is evidenced by the term the Dark Continent, used describe or refer to Africa. It was reportedly popularised in the book *Through the Dark Continent* (1878)[37] by Henry Morton Stanley (1841 – 1904), a British American coloniser who became internationally famous for his so-called 'discoveries' in Congo, and for the 'rescue' of another coloniser, Scottish physician and missionary David Livingstone from Ujiji, a town near Lake Tanganyika in Central Africa in 1871. Livingstone had been uncontactable for six years after going in search of the source of the river Nile.[38]

The Dark Continent idea propagated the notion that Africa was devoid of 'light' (really, enlightenment), of technology, spiritual advancement, modernity, with Africans as 'primitive,' bestial simpletons.

Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) describes a duality between civilisation (Europe, whiteness) and savagery (Africa, Darkness) within the heart of Congo Free State, central Africa. I position it here as an obvious companion of Stanley's. Conrad's depictions of Africa and Africans has been critiqued by post-colonial scholars most notably by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1930 – 2013) who in his lecture *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*' (1975)[39] elegantly eviscerates Conrad's lazy propagandising of supposed African inferiority and European superiority, his comfort in everyone being in their 'rightful place.' For Conrad Africa is 'the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization' although what Achebe identifies as 'the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry' worries Conrad who Achebe concludes is 'a thoroughgoing racist' who 'chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths' in his 'offensive and deplorable book' (all Achebe, 1988, pp52 - 68.)

37 Stanley, Henry M, (1879*) Through The Dark Continent; Or The Sources Of The Nile, Around The Great Lakes Of Equatorial Africa, And Down The Livingstone River To The Atlantic Ocean*. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington)

38 Stanley relates his version of events in the book *How I Found Livingstone* in 1872. (CITE)

39 This title refers to the edited and published version of Achebe's lecture, which was given as the Chancellors Lecture at University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1975. I am aware that there is a rich conversation about Conrad and race, I do not find it useful to get into much detail here, as this discourse is not pertinent to my thesis.

Conrad additionally depicts the extraction – of Earth and human resources (and, I would argue, of dignity) that characterised colonial violence. Imani Perry describes Conrad's depiction of his female African lover in the book, identifying that the author's 'mirroring of the wilderness and the African woman, anthropomorphizing the land and making her indistinguishable from it, pivots around the words "fecund" and "passion"' (2018:64). Perry also refers to the 'productive/reproductive work of the land' in the novella (2018:64.)

I want to place her in conversation with Kathryn Yusoff's work on the extractive violence of settler colonialism on the formation of the semiotics of geology and 'Anthropocene monumentality' (2018:13). Specifically, I consider Yusuf's understanding of Blackness 'not as metaphor but as a materiality' with 'symbolic, territorial, and psychic life' (2018:17.) as being in conversation with some foundation ideas my work engages with. This is the space that works such as the sculpture *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (2019) exists within (although as metaphor *and* material).

Yusoff reminds us that the current racialised formations persist because it is 'a humanity that is racially constituted' where the 'coterminous birth of Man and his Others forms the basis for the enlightenment subject of ethical consideration.' Yusoff asserts that this 'codifies Whiteness with freedom and Blackness with objectification and slavery' (all 2018:55.) In this sense, the turn towards Darkness is my work can be read as an undoing of the Biblical interpretation that inspired a culture of categorisation that was 'inscripted at the onset of race' with 'Whiteness as the colour of universality' (both Yusoff 2018:51) in opposition to the Enlightenment birth of 'man,' I instead constitute humanity through the Black woman, with McKittrick's caution in mind.

Although Darkness absorbs light, genocidal colonial capitalism extracts from Blackness. To find fecundity in darkness, I argue, is to pour energy into it, to replenish it and to recognise it as the source of life. Whilst Perry, Yusoff (and, yes, Conrad) are concerned with the Earth, my conception of Dark Fecundity directs me off-world, into the stars.

Stanley's legend is intimately connected with the perpetuation of Africa's 'darkness' and the supposed inferiority of Africans. Neither he or Conrad (who has significant defenders within

the literary world) originated these ideas, nor the defence of colonial expansion and imperialism. There is of course a history of substantial academic decolonial and anticolonial work that addresses the subject of the 'Othering' of colonial and previously colonial subjects, and my proposition owes a substantial debt to the critical interventions of such figures as Franz Fanon (1925 – 1961), W.E B Du Bois (1868 – 1963), Édouard Glissant (1928 - 2011), Edward Said (1935 – 2003), Stuart Hall (1932 – 2014), Angela Davis (b.1944), bell hooks (b.1952) and Paul Gilroy (discussed elsewhere in this text.)

Arguably, the Dark Continent mythology formed part of the intellectual underpinning of the Scramble for Africa[40] and the associated 'discoveries' therein. German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770 – 1831) propagandised the idea of African people's unknowingness and uncivility, describing the 'peculiarly African character' as 'difficult to comprehend' as the 'characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence.' (Hegel 1956, p92). Hegel depicts African people as Godless (that is, un-Christian) concluding that the Negro 'exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state' and advises that the (European) reader set aside what they call feeling in order to be able to possibly comprehend the African[41].

To Hegel, Negroes exhibit *contempt* for humanity and are cannibals ('to the sensual Negro, human flesh is but an object of sense,') (1956:102.) The sense of superiority Hegel proposes legitimised colonialism and contemporary anti-Blackness through the monumental impact on European thought of his historical dialectics (which Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895) applied to class, for example.) On the question of racial superiority, these ideas confirmed that – in the heart of such Darkness – anything goes. Any atrocity, any abjection is valid, understandable even, in order to bring enlightenment to the savages. As scholar Avram Alpert describes, 'colonial racism directly informs the very concept of dialectics' (Alpert, 2020.) This attitude towards Darkness is a license for Europeans to unleash the basest instincts for domination as a divine right.

40 Here I am referencing the period of rapid and violent invasion, division, extraction from and colonisation of most of the African continent by European countries between 1881 – 1914.
41 Eshun's African anthropologists from the future wage war on 'countermemory' by bringing 'Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al' (Eshun, 2003, p288.)

Black = Bad

It is therefore unsurprising that the word Black itself is continually connected to bad, negative or undesirable things. As a child, I loved reading the dictionary, discovering new words and their etymology. I have a distinct recollection of the work my family undertook to ensure that the Blackness = badness equation did not take root within my psyche, despite the hold this association had on broader society. Instead, I was encouraged to understand the erroneous connections made between Blackness and badness within metaphorical language, especially words and phrases in everyday use. Blackmail. Black mark. Black heart. Black humour. To Blacken someone's name.

This criticality gave me the tools to question the given nickname of the dark skinned Black British boxer Nigel Benn (b.1964), who used the nickname the 'Dark Destroyer' as part of his brand. Darkness as menace, violence and physical prowess. I want to detect a dynamic ambiguity with Benn, a reclamation of Darkness as Black Power, but I fear I am projecting too much. Certainly, Benn's public persona was not one of explicit Black pride or efficacy, in the manner of US heavyweight and activist Muhammad Ali (1942 – 2016.) This man was of dark complexion, Black (Darkness personified) and thus a force for destruction – that was the message.

Blackness as metaphor

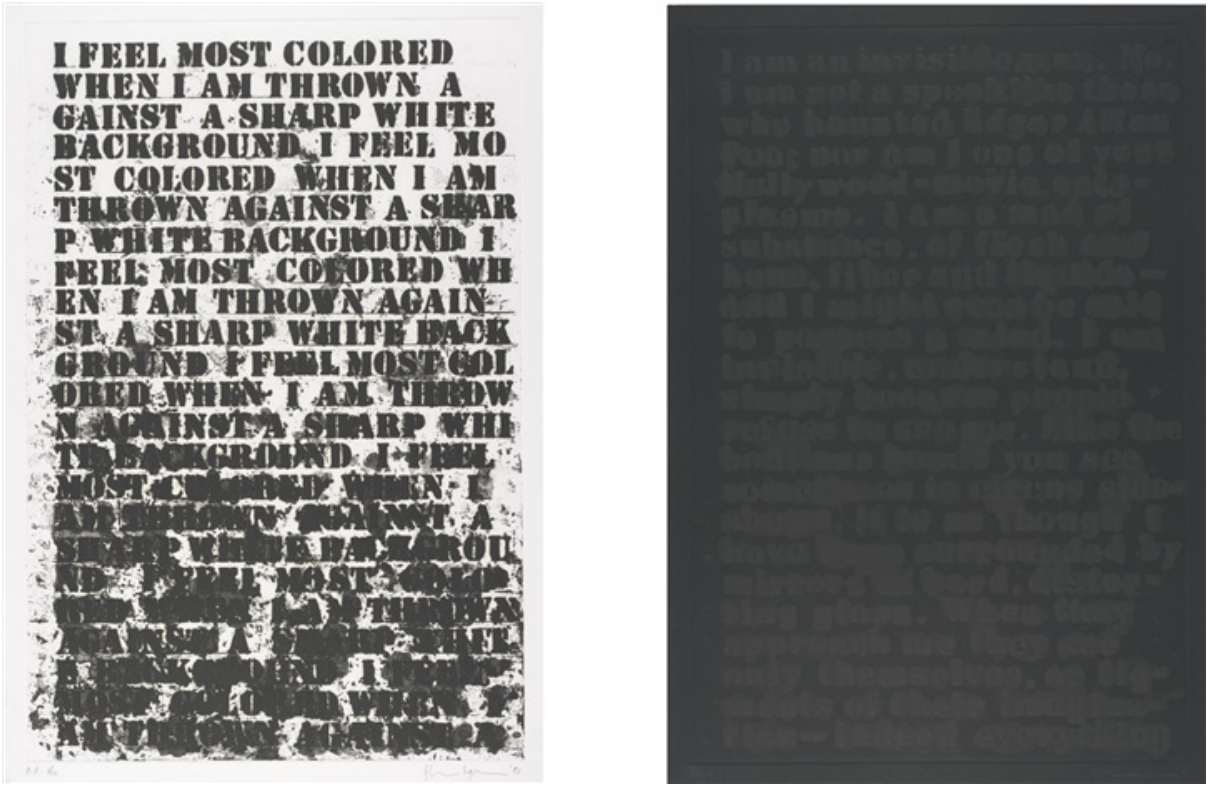

Fig. 8 Glenn Ligon (1992), *Untitled (Four Etchings*). Collection: MoMa (Gift of Gwen and Peter Norton)

Consider Glenn Ligon's work *Four Etchings* (1992), comprised of two black text on white and two black text on black aquatint etchings. The work quotes from celebrated American authors Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison; I will focus on one particular panel.

Ligon takes the line 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background' from Hurston's essay *How it Feels to Be Coloured Me* (1928) and reproduces it across the entire frame until the collapses into unintelligible Blackness. The works suggests the impossibility of representation, or at least of subject formation, when one is 'other.' Additionally, there is a sense of Darkness emerging in the back/black etchings, of an unknowability, unwillingness or resistance to be easily interpreted or understood by 'others.' Ligon is speaking to the full complexity of the Black subject through the aesthetic qualities of Darkness.

I use the term reproduce deliberately here; Ligon multiples and redistributes Hurston's text into and through Darkness. By using a different form to the original (visual art as opposes to literature) Ligon also expands the range of audience for Hurston's idea and provides relief

for those who might identify with it within an additional context. Nonetheless, Ligon is not working within a conceptual binary – this phrase appears mysterious out of context and as art critic Carol Vogel describes leaves the viewer to 'work for the answers' (Vogel, 2011). In conversation with writer Nikita Gale, Ligon comments on his use of text, connecting it to his childhood as part of a 'black working-class family, education is the cliché, education was the key, so there's a lot of emphasis placed on reading and literacy as a sort of way to achieve '(Gale, 2013.) Ligon's reflection on his childhood practices and family dynamic regarding education resonates with my own within this statement, and suggests a generative practice embedded at an early age. I see this work as an example of Dark Fecundity – from an articulation birthed by Hurston, reproduced using a form of technology, multiplied and distorted. Imagined anew.

Art historian Darby English describes 'Racially black darkness' as having an …'ultimately discursive character' (English,2007, p2) which I find useful here. English was referring to David Hammon's *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002) installation which takes place in a dark room the audience is invited to move around in, each individual made indistinguishable because of the sheer Blackness of the space. This discursiveness is a useful tool to consider my thinking around Darkness.

In her essay, Hurston says 'At certain times I have no race… The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads' (Hurston, 1928.) I suggest holding this thought in place throughout this discussion of Dark Fecundity. Whilst racelessness is not my aim as such, the idea of the cosmic self, the African descendant woman as the eternal, beyond time, is fundamental to the development of *HFO*.

The conflation of Blackness and Darkness; why I choose Darkness

I have demonstrated the connection between commonly distributed interpretations (or misinterpretations) of Abrahamic scripture, violent, extractive colonialism and the demonisation of Darkness as Blackness within the so-called West. I want to briefly foreground some more contemporaneous social usages of these tropes to demonstrate their longevity and centrality within the popular imaginary.

Most obviously, I hold in mind that African enslavement was about reproduction and extraction. This includes the reproduction of Black people as property to be bought and sold. In the *Incomplete Encyclopaedia* chapter (page 103), I discuss the remarkable reproducibility of HeLa cells and the implications of a Black woman's body (a descendant of enslaved African's) as the source of this fecundity.

It is possible to find videos on YouTube of HeLa cells dividing, and I confess to spending a significant amount of time watching them. When Black people are property – or indeed whilst making substantial amounts of money for the pharmaceutical and biomedical industry as a result of extraction like HeLa cells – Black reproducibility is presented as a useful, good thing (for capitalism.) Once African's are no longer property, the narrative shifts, hence euphemisms such as 'population momentum' to describe the expected impact of the African continent's continued population growth (2.7%, double that of South Asia)[42] and the youth of its population (more than half are under 25 years of age).[43]
These projections can often be treated with fear and anger, I argue – and it is hardly an original thought - due to white demographic anxiety. We see this within most starkly within discourses in the so-called West around immigration, in addition to anxiety over 'over population' amongst some parts of the environmental movement. (For an example of this, note Prince William's speech warning of the dangers of African overpopulation at an event for The Tusk Trust in 2017[44].) Meanwhile, African fossil fuel emissions are only around five per cent of the global total.[45] African reproduction – the fecundity of its youthful population – continues to be positioned as the problem, as opposed to extractive exploitation of nature and people, and global economic inequality.

42 The Economist, *Africa's Population will Double by 2050*, March 28th 2020. Available at: https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africas-population-will-double-by-2050 [Last accessed 11th July 2021]
43 Kariba, Felix, *The Burgeoning African Youth Population: Potential or Challenge*? Cities Alliance, 30th July 2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2udf74vb [Last accessed 11th July 2021]
44 Ma, Alexandra. Overpopulation is having a 'catastrophic effect' on the natural world, warns Prince William. 3rd November 2017, Business Insider. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/prince-william-duke-of-cambridge-overpopulationruining-wildlife-tusk-trust2017-11 {Last accessed 14th July 2021}
45 See, Statistica.com, World *carbon dioxide emissions from 2009 – 2019 by region (in million metric tons of cardon dioxide)*, 14th September 2020. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/205966/world-carbon-dioxide-emissions-by-region/ {Last accessed 14th July 2021}

My intention here is to acknowledge the ways in which fecundity, Blackness and reproduction continue to be presented as inherently problematic. A continent with a young population would naturally be expected to grow in population, as young people tend to have more children than – for example – the over 50s. What this dystopian discourse fails to consider is the possibilities of the natural environment – solar, wind – and the potential for ingenious inventions on how to live *emerging* from the continent.

I have mentioned my investment through my practice in Darkness / Blackness as a place of emergence and possibility. Working with the potentiality and mythology of HeLa cells is therefore about reimagining uncontainable reproducibility as a value and asset, as the potential source for new ways of forming community and imagining the construction of social relations.

Furthermore, my ongoing video series based on conversations with Black women scientists position them as progenitors, and producers of knowledge. By treating such knowledge as material, I am also reproducing new works and new modalities for the distribution of their ideas (inasmuch as the visual art context is a new content for their work.) I am reproducing their knowledge, which also feeds into other aspects of my work. This type of generative imaginary is also Dark Fecundity.

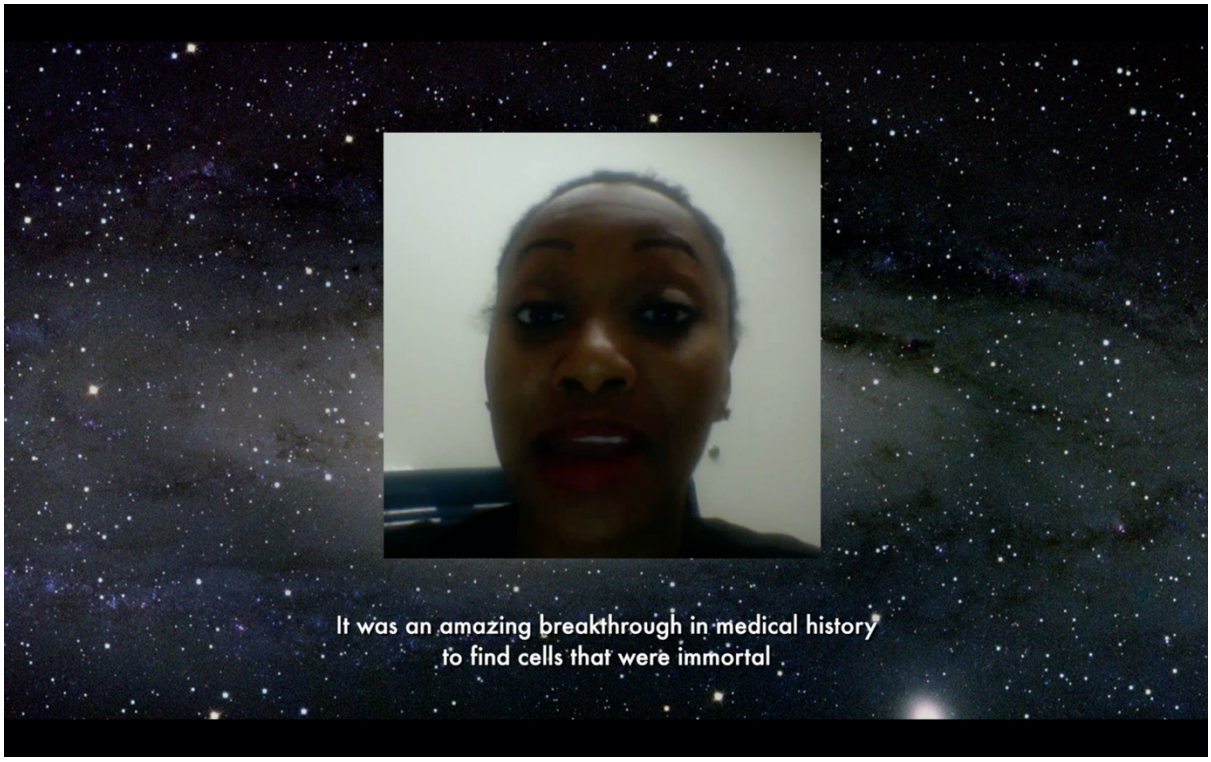

Fig. 9 Sonya Dyer (2017 / 2019). *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Hadiyah-Nicole Green* [Video Still]

In the video works *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Miranda Lowe* (2019) and *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Hadiyah-Nicole Green* (2017-19) both scientists discuss how sf in popular culture has opened up new avenues for conversation about her work, or in the case of Dr Green, introduced new ways to consider the concepts they now work with. In *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Chanda Predcod-Weinstein* (2019), Dr Weinstein explores how are active role in 'Star Trek ' fandom offers not only community, but a context in which to explore her conceptual and political differences with the concept of the Star Trek Federation as a political entity, in relation to questions of colonialism.

Within the work, these reference points support the general aesthetic and philosophical choice to combine science fiction and science fact. An animation of the original drawing of the *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha II Prototype* (2019) appears on screen during each video and they all take place within a backdrop of the Andromeda Galaxy. The interviews were filmed via video call in the subjects' place of work. We see real-life scientists discussing their work within the context of speculation within an image of an existing galaxy. The Darkness of Andromeda is the site of reinvention and combination, or Dark Fecundity.

Aesthetics of Darkness

First exhibited in the exhibition *Rewriting the Future* (Site Gallery, 2019)[46] - consisting of a large-scale sculpture and four video works made with the scientists (played on three large screens) - *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (2019) is a 6ft sculptural object and its shadow, produced by manipulating light. Within the installation musician Alice Coltrane's (1937 – 2007) instrumental composition *Andromeda's Suffering* (1971) played, directed towards the sculpture. A thunderous, sweeping and dramatic work, the track features 25 stringed instruments, lending a sense of cosmic wonder.

Coltrane's influence can also be found in the work of other artists working within Black Futurities, including visual artists the Otolith Group and musicians including Flying Lotus (aka Steven Ellison, who is also Coltrane's great nephew.) By including the Coltrane track my intention was to envelope another Black, female artist who was also fascinated with the myth of Andromeda. Indeed, as Ellison suggests Coltrane's music 'should be there for you when you need' it.[47] Her inclusion here felt essential to the work, part of an intergenerational, trans-Atlantic, multi-dimensional discourse, which are essential components of *Dark Fecundity* as I have described it.

Within the schema of *HFO*, the sculpture performs the role of the first of three proposed Space vessels for the transportation of HeLa cells to the Andromeda Galaxy, as part of a speculative effort to create an alternative society whose progenitors are the collective knowledge and imagination of Black women of science, speculative fiction and mythology. As I detail in the *Incomplete Encyclopaedia* chapter (page 113) the vessels are named after three enslaved women experimented on by physician and gynaecologist J Marion Sims (1813 – 1883) without pain relief or any form of care. By naming these vessels after Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, my aim is to reimagine them as progenitors of the future, contributing to the convention within speculative fiction of naming space vessels after notable figures from Earth's history (as exemplified in the 'Star Trek' universe.)

46 Rewriting the Future, Site Gallery, Sheffield ran from 27th September 2019 – 2nd February 2020
47 Andrews, Euan, Alice Coltrane. thequitus.com. Available at:https://thequietus.com/articles/22502-alice-coltrane-world-spirituality-classics-volume-1-ecstatic-music-turiyasangitananda [Last accessed 1/7/21]

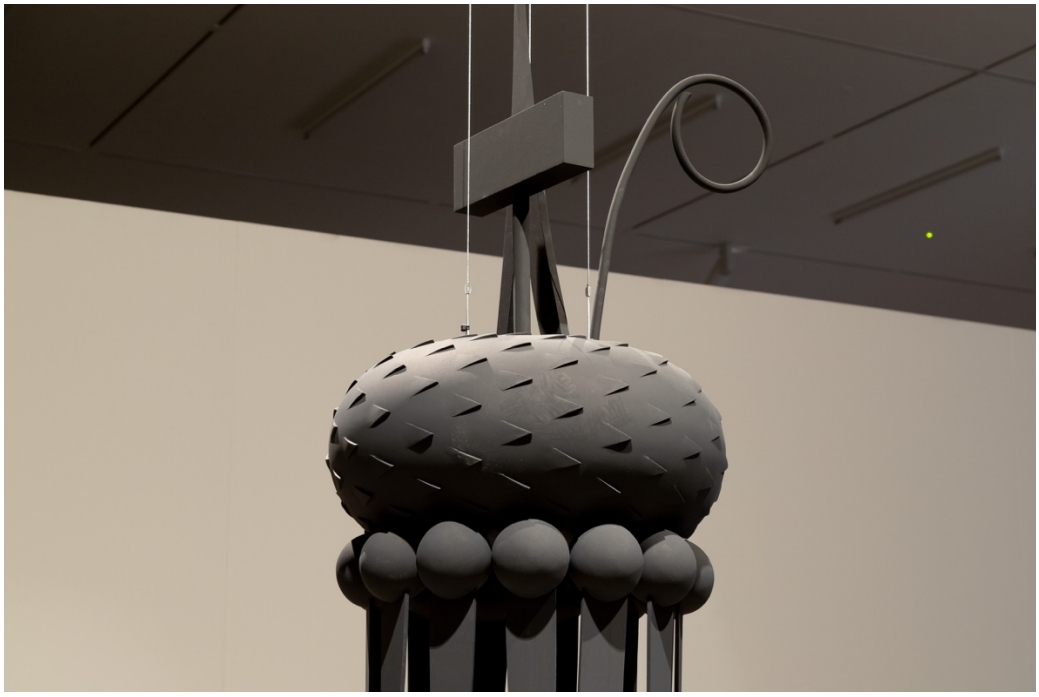

Fig. 10 Sonya Dyer (2019) *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (close up). [Sculpture] (Credit: Jules Lister).

The sculpture itself – an exploratory, navigational model within the HFO mythos– is inspired by natural and mechanical forms such as navigational tools, sea creatures and instruments of measurement. It is composed of various woods, metals and composite plastics, painted in Black 2.0 paint, which at time of making claimed to be the densest commercially available black paint on the market.[48] The intense and unrelenting blackness of the paint suggests the vastness of Space and its infinite capacity. Furthermore, my use of this intense blackness is a commentary on Blackness as a social construct and its supposedly uncontrollable reproducibility represented not only within the story of the 'immortal' Hela cells, but in popular racist mythology of supposedly abhorrent and problematic reproductive capabilities of Black people. *Dark Fecundity*, as a theory of hyper reproducibility is positioned as a generative and transformative cultural force.

The Andromeda galaxy has also featured in earlier works including as a poster and a variety of backdrops for The Claudia James Space Station, a joint commission between BALTIC

48 Produced by artist Stuart Semple, who states the new 3.0 version of the paint is 'the blackest and mattest acrylic paint on the planet.' Semple's paint was produced in response to artist Anish Kapoor's super dense black paint, which he has prohibited other artists from using. Semple claims to have banned Kapoor from using his paint, which is nothing else is a great marketing strategy.

Centre for Contemporary Arts and The New Bridge Project. I have additionally used it in a variety of performative lectures and other contexts; I continue to use it as my Zoom background for online meetings and public events, placing myself within the galaxy as I discuss my work.

Galaxies, constellations and black holes are themselves mysterious spaces we as yet know little about - much of what we think we know is based on scientific imagination. The current understanding is that they are expansive spaces containing multitudes. According to NASA, black holes themselves are places in space where 'gravity pulls so much that even light cannot get out.' (NASA, 2018.)

Particularly fascinating for my work is the fact that black holes are invisible, as light is unable to get out. Through working with metaphorical, racial and aesthetic Darkness I am engaging with the idea of Darkness absorbing light, including the supposed Darkness of the African continent and of the Black, female body and its productive (and reproductive) qualities and to render them generously generative, as opposed to problematic. The intense black of the Super Black paint is such that, in all the images of the sculpture I possess (taken by a professional photographer) it appears to be grey in colour. It is so dense, so intensely Black that it can hardly be accurately reproduced photographically.

To embrace Dark Fecundity is therefore to emerge from the vast blackness of Space and to expand across the planet and then leap into the stars once again, to Andromeda. It is to reorder time and reposition the past 500 years (the age of the enslavement and colonialism of African's) as no time at all. It is to embrace the Darkness as home and Blackness and infinite as creativity and the very essence of life itself. To imagine that Dark Fecundity can only come into being through the generative, the intergenerational, the international, the female to recognise that it can reproduce itself. Endlessly.

AN INCOMPLETE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BLACK WOMAN IN THE FUTURE

This chapter consists of an introduction, an incomplete encyclopaedia and a text expanding on the main practice submission of my thesis, the exhibition *Rewriting the Future* (2019), alongside commentary on monumentalism in relation to my work.

Reimagining the encyclopaedia

How words are used – and the potential power and impotence of words - are recurring theme in my practice. This is evident in the words I use to title works. For example, my project the *Claudia Jones Space Station* was not a space station in actuality, but was inspired by a space station's mode of operation. *aPOCalypso* was not literally heralding an apocalypse – or indeed inviting people to dance – but proposing a rupture in our understanding of futurity, agency and time, and so on. What I attempt by calling this chapter an encyclopaedia is to reconstitute and reimagine what an encyclopaedia could be, and what it could be in terms of my practice.

I begin by acknowledging the colonial nature of the encyclopaedia as a way of categorising and constituting knowledge. In her critique of canons and the academy, McKittrick suggests 'academic disciplines make knowledge into categories and subcategories; methodology and method make discipline and knowledge about categories,' proposing that 'discipline is the act of relentless categorization' (all McKittrick, 2021, p35) and placing it in opposition to practice, which involves – amongst other things - care. My practice involves caring for legacies – both real and imagined – as a way of proposing the future.

The encyclopaedia as we know it today was initially created by the Comte du Buffon and colleagues, in the form of the *Histoire Naturelle* between 1749 - 1804, as mentioned in the Methodology chapter. It is therefore intimately connected to the project of colonisation, and if we follow Malik's scholarship, a sense of permeance attached to social inequalities (such as anti-Blackness) as part of the natural order of things (Malik, 1996.) Yusoff (2018) draws attention to the extractive nature of the colonial project, and of the 'natural sciences' from their nascent development during the Enlightenment period to today (Yusoff, 2018). This includes extracting indigenous knowledge, as well as extracting from the land itself. My practice is essentially concerned with what to do with the above; how to take this history

and reimagine this form - part of this is considering what to do with the word encyclopaedia itself.

I pay attention to the term's etymology and definition. Encyclopaedia is defined as, 'a book or set of books containing many articles arranged in alphabetical order that deal with either the whole of human knowledge or with a particular part of it, or a similar et of articles on the internet[49]' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019.)

The word encyclopaedia derives from the mid 16th century and is of pseudo-Greek roots, meaning 'all round education' (Oxford Dictionary, 2019) or 'general course of instruction' (entymonline, 2019). I find this pseudo reading (based on apparent false understanding by Latin authors of the Greek term *enkyklios* (circle) *paideia* (education), meaning training in a circle) to be itself fascinating. 'Training in a circle' refers to the classical essentials of a liberal education – arts and sciences.[50] – which is a particularly apt definition to bear in mind in relation to the ways in which my work engages with both. I propose reimagining the encyclopaedia as a form as a de-colonial, destabilizing act.

I return to Le Guin 's refusal of the primacy of the singular, masculine hero within fiction and her suggestion that the 'proper, fitting shape for the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things' (LeGuin,1996, p153). Le Guin describes the novel as a 'medical bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another' and to us (LeGuin, 1996, p153.) My work is associative and generative, and my approach to the encyclopaedia aims to make this apparent.

The singular, masculine hero does not make sense within the context of a bag; he lacks the pedestal he so desperately requires. LeGuin describes her work as 'full of space ships that

49. Oxford Dictionary provides a similar result, although additionally suggests encyclopedias can be found via the archaic CD-ROM format.

50 Encyclopedia Britannica additionally describes the encyclopedia as a reference work that 'treats a particular branch of knowledge in a comprehensive manner'; and provides a characteristically comprehensive history of the form.

get stuck, missions that fail, people who don't understand' (Le Guin, 1996, p153). In a sense, she is describing creating worlds that are somewhat incomplete or unfinished, in the way that everyday life often is.

Throughout my research process, I gained increased understanding of – and empathy with – Le Guin's philosophy of storytelling. I began to understand the importance of storytelling to my work. I developed from my initial interest in singular heroes and firsts (such as, 'the first Black so and so') to create a 'carrier bag' containing a multitude of stories, or connections to other stories. This incomplete encyclopaedia, therefore, should be read in the 'carrier bag' tradition.

The encyclopaedia I propose involves placing multiple forms of practice in conversation with each other. Through my practice, this involves text, video (narrative, based on the interview format and a combination of both), sculpture, sound, fact and mythology. These associations are generative, but can also stand alone. They cross reference.

As the title suggests, this chapter is designed to be incomplete. My intention is to subvert and revise the purpose of the encyclopaedia by introducing elements of world making, ignoring the requirement for order and uniformity of word count, whilst utilizing some of its formal conventions. The encyclopaedia also makes connections and references between the key reference points of my practice.

Below are the first entries to the *Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future:*

Hailing Frequencies Open

Hailing Frequencies Open (HFO) (2018-) is an ongoing body of work by artist Sonya Dyer. This body of work consist of video, sculpture, text and sound-based work; the title derives from a phrase used by *Star Trek* character 'Nyota Uhura,' played by actor, dancer and singer Nichelle Nichols in the original series and early films.)

‘Hailing Frequencies Open’ is utilised not only in the naming of works, but as an organising principle. It signifies being open to the seemingly unconnected, making the intangible, tangible. Hailing frequencies open centres ‘Nyota Uhura’s’ ‘supremely competent Black womanhood’ (carrington, 2016, p86) as an essential component of humanity’s future. See also, *Star Trek*. By naming this work thus, Nichols’ role in the franchise – and wider society – is actively reimagined as something more central to the construction of humanities future in space.

See also, *Star Trek*; *Nichols, Nichelle; Uhura, Nyota*.

Star Trek

Fig. 11 Nichelle Nichols as ’Uhura’ (1968). (Credit: CBS Television.)

‘**Star Trek’** (1964-) is an enduring television and film franchise from the USA set in the distant future, where humanity has made community with beings from other planets. It features both episodic and serial-based story telling. The Original Series (CBS Television, 1964-69) featured a man of Japanese descent, a Russian character, an African woman, a male character played by an actor of European Jewish descent, and a mixed heritage human-alien hybrid also played by a Jewish actor. It represented – for its time – a multi-ethnic, utopic view of the future.

‘Hailing frequencies open’ is a familiar speech act (Austin 1962, Butler 1997), to fans of the television series entirely associated with the character ‘Lt Nyota Uhura.’ In many episodes it may have been the only dialogue spoken by the character. Uhura was often reduced to ‘her

signature line, “hailing frequencies open,” (with) very limited screen time, especially compared to her white male co-stars William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy’ (Mafe, 2018, p122.) Nichols was vocal about her frustrations with this limitation, a reality that fed into the script of the ‘Star Trek’ episode *The Man Trap*[51] (CBS Television, 1966), where a bored, frustrated and flirty Uhura laments to ‘Mr Spock’ (Leonard Nimoy),

“Mr Spock, sometimes I think if I hear that word *frequency* once more I’ll cry.”[52]

This re-signification of her “calling card” is, according to andre carrington, a reminder to herself and the audience that ‘she and her character have qualities… beyond the role of the communications officer. Her signature phrase had usually served to reiterate her marginal position’ (carrington, 2016, p81).

Mae Jemison – the first Black woman astronaut - began each of her Space Shuttle shifts with the term ‘Hailing Frequencies Open,’ a source of pride for Nichols,’ who describes it as being ‘heard around the globe – and, perhaps, beyond’ (Nichols, 1994, p219). Jemison herself was influenced as a child by seeing the character of Uhura on *Star Trek*; the two women became friends, and Jemison appeared on an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. [53]

See also, *Jemison, Mae*; Hailing Frequencies Open

Nyota Uhura

51 Although this was the sixth episode to be filmed, it was the first episode to be screened; firstly on Canadian channel CTV, and then on NBC in the USA.

52 Nichols’ described this as *a line I’d repeat often enough to Gene to warrant being memorialized in this scene* (Nichols; 1994, 153)

53 In the episode *Second Chances* (during the sixth season of Star Trek: The Next Generation in 1993), Jemison played Lt Junior Grade Palmer.

Nyota Uhura was born in the year 2239, in the United States of Africa.[54] She is a fictional character in the Star Wars universe and arguably one of the most iconic and recognisable characters in sf film and video and a key member of the *USS Enterprise* crew. She is played by NASA pioneer Nichelle Nichols. At the start of the Original Series 'Uhura' is a Communications Officer; by the end of Nichols's run as the character, she has been promoted to Commander.

Adilfu Nama reminds us that Uhura's 'presence on the bridge of the Enterprise made the absence of black people in other science fiction television shows and films all the more conspicuous '(Nama, 2008, p1). 'Uhura's' role in the fictional future amplified her cultural impact as an 'icon of twentieth-century small screen (symbolising) change and possibility for black people, especially in the midst of the civil rights movement.' (2008:1). Her 'ability to go where no black woman had gone before – outer space and, more literally, an empowered role on network television – made her a cinematic pioneer' (2008:1). Here Mafe echoes the familiar Star Trek line 'where no man has gone before,' placing Uhura firmly within the franchise's semiotic memory.

carrington describes 'Uhura' as 'the example set in popular culture…. to portray cooperative, supremely competent Black womanhood as part of a desirable future' (carrington, 2016, p86). It is this competence that interests me, particularly as it pertains to Nichols' own visionary pragmatism in her work for NASA; fiction bleeding in to reality.

See also, Nichols, Nichelle; Hailing Frequencies Open

Nichelle Nichols

54 This information is available from various Star Trek related books and is confirmed on the official CBS online *Star Trek* database.

Nichelle Nichols (b.1932) is an actor, singer, dancer and NASA pioneer from the United States of America. She is best known for playing the fictional character 'Nyota Uhura' in the television and film franchise *Star Trek*.

During the Original Series run, the production company Desilu (run by Lucille Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz, regarded as liberal pioneers in television) refused to give the actor a permanent contract, such as enjoyed by her colleagues including Shatner and Nimoy. Instead, Nichols was employed as a day player, without the security of knowing whether she had work beyond the next day.

Ironically, as Nichols's presence on screen represented the kind of utopian cultural diversity the series was created to promote, this ended up being lucrative for the actor – she was needed most days, often in the background of other characters scenes. For a highly talented actor and singer with a strong background in theatre, this proved frustrating. Nichols also experienced considerable interpersonal racism behind the scenes[55]. Equally upsetting was discovering that her fan mail (which rivalled that of Shatner and Nimoy) had been withheld from her, something Nichols described as 'the ultimate humiliation' (Nichols, 1994, p157.)

The dichotomy of Nichols's experience verses the impact of Uhura mean that in order to 'promise Black women's future liberation from limited, degrading roles in the future, Nichols had to perform their continued subordination in the present' (carrington, 2016, p73). This sense of sacrificing the now for the future is, I would argue, characteristic of the lived experiences of generations of Black women across the world.

This need to 'sacrifice now for the future' was exemplified by one of the most celebrated Trekkies of this era - civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr (1929 – 1968). Upon hearing of Nichols's plan to resign from the show, King implored her to stay. King referred to 'Uhura' as 'the first nonsterotypical role on television, male or female '(for a Black actor) (1994:158). King implored Nichols to stay, as a form of activism, 'you have opened a door that must not be allowed to close… you changed the face of television forever," Nichols was more

55 Numerous humiliating incidences are detailed in Nichols' book.

important for people "who *don't* look like us. For the first time, the world sees us as we should be seen, as equals, as intelligent people," (both 1994:59.) Indeed, it is ironic that – despite the off-screen discrimination she experienced, and the on-screen limitations of her role, Nichols/ Uhura became an iconic figure to a diverse legion of fans.

In the anthology *Letters to the Future: Black Women / Radical Writing*, Ruth Ellen Kocher (Kocher, 2018, p29) imagines the conversation between King and Nichols:

Martin looks over her red uniformed shoulder
He looks through the window past the white Cadillac hood
Over the mint green roof of the Lorraine Hotel

Kocher reinforces the connection to the civil rights movement through her use of iconic, tragic visual clues (in this instance, evoking the famous images of the Lorraine Motel, the site of Dr King's assassination in 1968).

Martin says in an oratory whisper
In space
we need someone to plant orchards…..
Someone
He says
and I trust you[56]

Kocher romanticises the struggle here, evoking the fertility of The Garden of Eden (a fitting metaphor for a Christian minister). The act of planting also implies growth, reproduction, Dark Futurity. King identified 'Uhura' as a potent symbol for the wholeness of Black people, and the influence (what we might now call soft power) this symbolism held. I cannot, however, help reflect on how often it is Black women who are expected to bear seemingly

56 I have taken liberties with the formatting of the text here. Whilst I have broken up the text in the pattern of Kocher's stanzas, she has used an unconventional style of formatting the in original text. I have preserved the writer's italics.

endless weight for the advancement of the race, despite the impact on health and wellbeing.[57]

Whilst 'Uhura' was destined to stay aboard the Enterprise, instead of 'beaming down' to experience adventures in strange lands, Nichols herself would prove a key figure in changing the face of space exploration.

See also, Uhura, Nyota; Jemison, Mae; Hailing Frequencies Open

Nichols, Nichelle; NASA

Fig. 12 Nichelle Nichols, undertaking NASA work, c.1970s. (Credit: Woman in Motion, Shout Films.)

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is an independent agency of the U.S. federal government responsible for the civilian space program, aeronautics and space research. It is responsible for the astronaut programme of the USA.

57 This idea is explored extensively within Black feminist theory and activism; my observation is hardly novel. However, I am particularly alert to the concept of *weathering*, credited to Arline Geronimus (1992), which speaks to the negative health implications of cumulative exposure to extreme stress experienced particularly by African American women – and by extension Black women from other countries in similar socio-political situations.

In the 1970's Nichols's consultancy and production company, Women in Motion, Inc. produced educational content for institutions such as NASA (Fig 11) and the Smithsonian Institution (Nichols, 1994, p219.)

Mafe correctly asserts that 'fifty years after her debut, she remains the symbolic face of black women in science fiction.. and a touchstone for fans and critics across cultures and generations' (Mafe, 2008, p1).[58] Some of those fans include scientists and astronauts like Jemison, as well as writers and artists, including the actor Whoopi Goldberg (who like Jemison, also portrayed a *Star Trek* character, 'Guinan' in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.)

Star Trek had cemented her status as a Nerd Goddess; by using this term I bring attention to Nichols / Uhura's status as a sex symbol, but also as a symbol of aspiration, hence her influence on future-Astronauts. I would argue that amongst fans of the original *Star Trek,* Uhura is revered, as Nichols's story about the volume of fan mail she received would suggest. Furthermore, Nichols ongoing work with NASA – and her popularity within SF fandom more generally – are symbolic of an understanding of her significance among SF aficionados. As such, by 1977 she was a member of the civilian board of directors of the National Space Institute (Nichols, 1994, p214.) As part of this role, Nichols was invited to give a speech to the NSI annual joint board / council meeting, entitled 'New Opportunities for the Humanization of Space.' (1994:214).

Nichols used the opportunity to challenge NASA, posing the question she had heard as she travelled around the country, "Space? So what's in it for me?" (1994:214). Nichols used her seat at the table to relay the sense of ambivalence towards space exploration that many people excluded from NASA's work had articulated to her. Until this point, NASA had only produced white, male astronauts.[59]

58 Goldberg portrayed 'Guinan' in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, between 1988 – 94.

59 The Mercury 13 cohort of women astronauts – who were never permitted to undertake a mission notwithstanding; NASA had not sent White women or any person of colour to Space at this point.

Nichols crucially offers suggestions for 'regaining the American people's trust, understanding and respect' (1994:214), deducing that as the Space Shuttle Mission - the first NASA mission not led exclusively by former fighter pilots (another field with its own history of exclusion and privileging of White men) - presented a unique opportunity for a different type of astronaut. Nichols reportedly castigated NASA for never acknowledging 'the qualifications of women and minorities by including them in the astronaut corps. Not one person of color? Not one woman on the entire planet qualifies?.. you've already sent a message:" Don't bother to apply."' (1994:215.)

Working with – amongst others - Dr Harriet Jenkins, (at this point the administrator for Equal Employment Opportunity and one of NASA's first Black female administrators), Nichols' suggests using well-known people for outreach. (Her suggestions include singer John Denver, actor Bill Cosby and activist Coretta Scott King.) It is John Yardley, head of NASA's Office of Manned Space Flight, who suggests Lt. Uhura would be a good pick.

Through Women in Film, Inc. Nichols toured and lectured widely and produced promotional films including Public Service Announcements. carrington describes how Nichols 'subverted her singular responsibility as the embodiment of utopia in Trek to engender broad-based changes in actual space exploration' (carrington, 2016, p69). This represents a radical praxis, an example of the potentiality of blurring the lines between fact and fiction to produce a new reality – a significant influence on Hailing Frequencies Open. In a film produced for the Smithsonian Air And Space Museum, Nichols states "the difference between fantasy and fact is that fantasy simply hasn't happened yet." (Nichols, 1994, p219). The idea that the future is to be constructed is foundational to my work - the tagline for the …*And Beyond Institute for Future Research* was, 'We Make the Future.[60]'

The campaign gained significant publicity; outlets including *Newsweek*, *People* and *Good Morning America* featured the campaign, as well as the popular PBS series *Nova*, in 1978 and ultimately led to applications to the Space Shuttle Program from people who would change the course of history, including Sally Ride (the first American woman in space), Fred

60 This is further explored in the chapter The Potential of the Think Tank.

Gregory and Guy Bluford, two of the first African-American astronauts, and three members of the fateful crew of the tragic *Challenger* shuttle (Judith Resnik, Ronald McNair and Ellison Onizuka)[61] in 1983 (Nicols,1994, p220.)

Nichols demonstrated the utopian values of the *Star Trek* universe, especially , as Carrington suggests 'the… ideal of meritocracy with which Nichelle Nichols approached the task of recruiting astronauts among people of color, including… Mae Jemison, represented the margins of society as reservoirs of talent rather than recapitulating the notion that dominant groups who are overrepresented in elite positions… were necessarily more talented than their minority counterparts' (carrington, 2016, p86.)

Nichols is central to the analysis of both Star Trek and NASA, which is undervalued within the broader sf community. Fundamentally, Black women's marginalisation within narratives of the future, particularly 'the relative alienation of Black women from the sf genre's conventional ways of envisioning race, gender and sexuality' (carrington, 2016, p69) has led to inadequate recognition for her 'transformative contributions to the public interrogation of questions at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and utopian discourse' (carrington, 2016, p69.) Recent critical work in Black speculative studies (Womack, Lavender, Mafe et al.) has gone some way to rectify this, as has the work of artists including Simone Leigh.

Nichols and 'Uhura' are foundational influences on *Hailing Frequencies Open*; Nichols's radical recuperation of her fame to transformative effect, and Uhura's generative impact on future astronauts and artists represent a version of Dark Futurity. Nichols carved her own place within the pantheon of heroes in the construction of both fictional and real-life future imaginaries for humanity.

61 According to Nichols, by the end of June 1077, (just four months after the start of her programme), 8,400 applications were received; 1.649 from women (a fifteen-fold increase) and 1,000 from 'minorities.' It is worth noting that in the seven months before Women in Motion Inc. began their campaign, only 35 applications were from minority candidates.

See also, *Simone Leigh, Nyota Uhura, Mae Jemison, Hailing Frequencies Open.*

Fig. 13 Mae Jemison (1993), *Star Trek: TNG* (1993). (Credit:CBS Television) [Television still].

Jemison, Mae C. Dr

Dr Mae Jemison (b.1956, USA) is an astronaut, engineer, doctor, dancer and principle, *The 100 Year Starship*, a project working towards making human interstellar travel possible within one hundred years (100yss.org, 2020.)

As a child, Jemison was influenced by the Star Trek character 'Uhura,' who made it possible for Jemison to imagine becoming an astronaut herself (Duke.edu, 2003). Jemison joined the NASA Space Shuttle programme in 1987, leaving in 1993. Reflecting on Nichols's influence on Mae Jemison's chosen career Ytasha Womack concludes that 'it all began with a fictitious character.' (Womack, 2013, p99.) Travelling aboard the space shuttle *Endevor* in 1992, Jemison made 127 orbits around the sun (womenshistory.org, 2021.) Jemison has written several books, as a performer she appeared on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in 1993 (Fig 12).

See also, *Nichols, Nichelle; Uhura, Nyota; Hailing Frequencies Open*.

Fig. 14 Simone Leigh (2012), Uhura *(Tanka)* [Video still].

Uhura *(Tanka)* (2012) is a video work by Jamaican American artist Simone Leigh. It belongs to the pantheon of Uhura-inspired art, predominately by Black women artists. In the early 2010s, Leigh developed a number of works in collaboration with Black women performers where they portrayed a version of the character, most notably in Uhura *(Tanka)* (2012). In this video work, writer Sharifa Rhodes Pitts is Leigh's 'Uhura,' caught in an endless glitch at her communication console.

Dressed in a Black, with metallic detailing on the cuff of her uniform (Fig 13), Rhodes Pitts / Uhura holds her hand to her ear and manoeuvre's levers on a console (which appears to be a sound mixing desk). The score is provided by Japanese composer Kaoru (b.1974); Leigh appears to be proposing a distinctively Afro-Asian future as a possible destination of the *Star Trek* project.

Leigh is quoted in as referring to Uhura as a childhood role model in a review by Elizabeth Kley for Artnet. Leigh is quoted as saying, "I sat through so many episodes.. just waiting for Uhura to speak. I had to deal with the conundrum that she only repeated one line." (Kley, 2012.) Leigh's observation of Nichols's own frustration at the limitations of the role. As an artist concerned with Black women as her core subject matter (artnews.com, 2020), Leigh

sets herself the task of creating remixes of the Uhura mythos, which speaks to Nichols' own experiences, and by extension the challenges faced by other Black women in society.

The work could be read as a precursor or companion to the idea of 'Glitch Feminism' as theorised by curator Legacy Russell (Russell, 2013.) For Russell, the 'glitch' 'embraces the causality of "error" 'by acknowledging the imperialist oppression (racism, sexism, class oppression and so on) of the system it is taking place within (Russell is refereeing to the so-called West here). In a system that subjects races, gendered and classes bodies to violence, Russell posits the 'glitch' as potentially a 'correction to the "machine",' (all Russell, 2013) and thus possible liberation.

Uhura is caught in a loop of a few seconds, back and forth. Leigh selects clothing that is a variation of Uhura's famous *Star Trek* costume, an instantly recognisable motif. But look more closely and the mise-en-scène is slightly *off* – the costume is not quite right; the performer has natural hair, as opposed to the straight hair representative of a kind of 'respectability' within the white gaze (see Dabiri, 2020, for example) the original Uhura wore. The console is clearly that of a sound engineer, not abord a spaceship from television. Leigh makes the familiar strange and by doing so offers the opportunity to imagine Uhura anew.

See also, *Nichols, Nichelle; Uhura, Nyota*.

Andromeda, mythology

Andromeda in Greek mythology is the daughter of King Cephus and Queen Cassiopeia[62] of Aethiopia. A galaxy and star constellation are named after her. Andromeda is a Misremembered Myth; a story often repeated (or distributed) in art and visual culture, but in a way that (deliberately) obscures her origins. Her heritage has been elided within so-called Western art history. Andromeda features in cinematic films, (such as *Clash of the Titans*, 1981, 2010), her galaxy is featured in video games (*Mass Effect: Andromeda*, 2017),

62 There are various spellings of Andromeda's parent's names in circulation.

and she is central to countless paintings and sculptures by European artists including Rodin, Rembrandt, Rubens and Titian.

See also, *Hailing Frequencies Open.*

Andromeda, variations

In accounts of classical literature, Andromeda's epic story is usually told from the point of view of Perseus, or the Gods. The information scholars work with now largely arise from sources such as the *Bibliotheca* and Ovid's version of the story in *Metamorphoses,* as well as astrological handbooks which reference the stories behind the constellations.

In some versions, Andromeda's beauty is under discussion, in others it is her mother's. Under the rubric of Dark Fecundity, the fidelity of the tale is immaterial; the uncertainty is generative, in the manner of the 'glitch.' Typically, Andromeda is punished by Poseidon due to her mother declaring her beauty is greater than the Greek Gods, or the Nereids). Perseus meets an (often naked) Andromeda who is chained to a rock after encountering – and conquering - Medusa. According to Kerényi, Cassiopeia 'angered the gods of the sea, in that she entered into a competition of beauty with the Nereids and boasted that she had emerged victorious' (Kerényi, 1959, p52). This reading suggests it is Cassiopeia's own beauty that is the source of contention, which is supported by Hyginus in the *Poetica astronomica* (McGrath, 1992, p5).

Andromeda appears as the collateral damage of her mother's contentious narcissism, such 'that Poseidon sent a flood over the country and a monster, to which her daughter Andromeda must be exposed' (Kerényi, 1959, p52). In *Metamorphoses,* Ovid describes how 'Ammon, the Unjust, had made decree Andromeda, the Innocent, should grieve her mother's tongue' (classics.mit.edu, 2009). Andromeda is therefore positioned as a victim of circumstances beyond her control – one way or another her mother's words have condemned her.

Nonetheless, Ovid describes Perseus as being so taken aback by her beauty that he initially mistakes her for a statue, 'beheld as marble he would deem her' (classics.mit.edu, 2009)

until her saw the breeze move her hair, and the tears in her eyes. Andromeda's beauty 'so amazed his heart, unconscious captive of her charms, that almost his swift wings forgot to wave' (classics.mit.edu, 2009). After some persuasion, she tells Perseus her name and that of her country, and confessed 'her charms had been her mother's pride' (classics.mit.edu, 2009). This firmly suggests that Ovid's reading is that it is Cassiopeia's boasting about Andromeda's beauty that has angered the Gods.

Philip Matyszak relates a version told from Perseus' point of view, - he encounters Andromeda – en route from a stopover in Egypt - 'chained to a rock for consumption by a sea monster… Perseus killed the monster, married Andromeda and petrified her former fiancé and his retinue with Medusa's head when they objected '(Matyszak, 2014, p130.) The fiancé is unnamed in this account, but Matyszak describes 'her sullen bridegroom, by name Phineus' (Matyszak, 2014, p53.)

The couple have an usually happy ending for Greek mythology; their influential offspring includes Perseus (fil), who is the 'ancestor of the Persian nation' (2014:130) and on their deaths 'Perseus, Andromeda and Cassiopeia were transported to the heavens. Andromeda is an entire galaxy, while Perseus is but a constellation' (2014: 130.)[63]

Andromeda, Black

Andromeda is a child of Aethiopian parents and there are numerous references to her complexion in variations of the text.

Firstly, let us consider the location of Aethiopia. Ken Dowden uses what he refers to as *'*antiquity's greatest novel, Heliodoros' Aithiopika' (second or fourth century AD), (which describes) 'a nation ambivalent between the barbarity of human sacrifice and an ultimate wisdom transcending even that of Egypt, a target for the purest of human souls.' (both

63 Slightly contradicting this, Kerényi writes, 'all four characters who met finally reached heaven as constellations, Kassiopeia and Kepheus, Andromeda and Perseus'. (Kerényi, 1959, p53). In fact, Andromeda is both a constellation and a galaxy.

Dowden, 1998, p130).[64] Ovid provides further detail: 'but beyond (Egypt) lie lands cast further adrift from reality. There live 'Aithiopians.'' (Dowden, 1998, p130), this land 'may be where Andromeda is exposed to Poseidon's sea–monster, for Perseus to rescue' (Dowden, 1998, p130.)

Further confirmation of Andromeda's origins can be found in Kerényi's work, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (1959*)*. Here 'Perseus flew over the land of the Ethiopians. There on a rocky coast (it is said that it was in Palestine near Jaffa) he caught sight of a fair maid. She had been exposed there in chains' (Kerényi,1959, p52.) Kerényi also refers to the story as 'in this Ethiopian tale' *(*1959:53). In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how, 'Innumerous kingdoms far behind were left, till peoples Ethiopic and the lands of Cepheus were beneath his lofty view' (Ovid, 663). All evidence confirms Andromeda is Ethiopian / East African.

Elizabeth McGrath's The *Black Andromeda* (1992) is arguably the most comprehensive study of Andromeda's origins. McGrath details notable references to Andromeda's Blackness including Ovid to Petrarch (14th century) and additionally notes how early texts in the Christian tradition her Blackness becomes symbolic, 'symbolising the darkness of sin' (McGrath, 1992, pg7.)

See also, *Hailing Frequencies Open; Dark Fecundity*

Andromeda, art

Artists as diverse as Peter Paul Rubens, Giogio Vasari, Edward Burne Jones, Titian and Rembrandt have all painted variations of Andromeda as the 'damsel in distress' (a partially clothed, or fully naked Andromeda chained to a rock) or depicted her 'heroic rescue'[65] (Perseus rescuing the damsel); action tropes that were popularised during the medieval era

64 Aethiopia, by these accounts, appears to be perceived as a place that is dangerous and sophisticated – by whatever standard the Greeks used as measurement – and thus respected and exoticized.

65 A useful resource documenting this practice is available at: https://tvtropes.org/ (Accessed 2nd August 2021.)

and persist in contemporary literature, film and television. I shall briefly address four such representative images here; all paintings, one of which is from a contemporary artist.

Whilst Andromeda is invariably depicted undressed, Matyszak reminds us 'nothing in the legend says Andromeda was chained naked' (1959:132), arguing that Andromeda's story 'allowed artists to express sadomasochism as high culture' (1959:132); most of the works below support this view.

Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) depicts the story in his epic work, *Atlas Turned to Stone; The Rock of Doom and the Doom Fulfilled; The Court of Phineas; The Baleful Head* (1875 – 6), which is part of the Tate collection (Fig 14). In this work on paper, the artist uses materials including gold paint, gouache, graphite and chalk to render the story cinematic. The narrative unfolds in a series of four scenes arranged horizontally.

Fig. 15 Burne-Jones (1875 – 6), *Atlas Turned to Stone; The Rock of Doom and the Doom Fulfilled; The Court of Phineas; The Baleful Head* [Painting] Tate collection.

Tate Britain's gallery display label[66] offers another variation of the myth. According to Tate's account, after turning Atlas to stone for being inhospitable, Perseus 'discovers the naked Andromeda bound to a rock as a sacrifice to appease the sea-god Poseidon' (Tate.org.uk, 2019.)

66 This gallery label is dated June 1993 and is available on the Tate website.

After defeating the monster, Perseus returns Andromeda to her home, whereupon her father offers her hand in marriage. After turning Phineus (the disgruntled suitor referenced earlier) and his men to stone using Medusa's head, Perseus convinces Andromeda of his divinity by revealing the head to her. This version places Andromeda in an extremely passive condition and no mention is made of Andromeda's origins, or her parent's royal status. One wonders if this is ultimately surprising, bearing in mind the whiteness of her complexion, as depicted by Burne-Jones?

In Rembrandt's *Andromeda Chained to the Rocks* (1630), a pale, red headed Andromeda – her breasts almost comically round – stands in the centre of the frame, her arms chained above her head. Nude from the waist up, she looks anxiously towards the upper right of the frame. Perhaps anticipating the sea monster? Or spotting Perseus? Rembrandt's Andromeda is a classical damsel in distress.

Peter Paul Rubens' Andromeda, as depicted in *Perseus Freeing Andromeda* (attributed to 1620,1622 or 1627 depending on the source), is light blond, rosy cheeked, fully naked and attended by putti (who have presumably accompanied Perseus). Perseus is in full medieval knight-style armour consisting of a cuirass and helmet, in addition to a red cloak. Pegasus appears relaxed, playing with the putto. Andromeda shyly looks down as Perseus' gaze is directed towards her; he and one of the putti remove her ropes. Perseus is the epitome of the medieval *knight –errant*[67].

67 Described by Cambridge Dictionary as a 'medieval knight who travelled around doing brave things and helping people who were in trouble' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)

Fig. 16 Titian (1554), *Perseo y Andrómeda* [Painting]. The Wallace Collection

Titian's *Perseo y Andrómeda* (1554) presents more of an action movie damsel rescue scene (Fig 15). Naked Andromeda is on the left of the frame, her modesty preserved by a gossamer thin piece of cloth she holds in her right hand. Unlike the other examples here, Andromeda is attached to the rock by metallic chains on her hands and feet; a strong hint of the sadomasochism Matyzsak proposed. The centre and right of the frame is where the action is: the monster emerges from the sea, baring teeth. We can see a single bulging eye, some kind of tail and mottled black fur; the comparison to Andromeda's pallor is made clear. Perseus is mid-air, shield and sword in hand. His clothes are flowing, bright coloured and romantic. His mouth is open; the viewer can imagine him yelling determinedly. Andromeda looks on passively. In contrast (but as a compositional complement) to the monster's single eye, the viewer can see her single earing – visually connecting her to Perseus style of dress. A city of some sorts lies in the distance.

Fig. 17 *The Rescue of Andromeda* (2011), Kimathi Donkor. [Painting]

In contrast Kimathi Donkor's (1965 -) *The Rescue of Andromeda* (2011) features a dark - complexioned Black woman sitting on a chair legs crossed at the ankles, hands placed on her thighs (Fig 16). This woman is wearing contemporary clothing, a dark dress that falls below the knee. She looks beyond the frame to her right. Behind her we catch a glimpse of some kind of monstrous figure, and beyond that, mountains. The woman is seated in some kind of circular grid. She does not look worried, nor does she look carefree; the woman is thoughtful.

This Andromeda is no damsel. It is not even clear if she is being held against her will. She is the only figure in the frame, and she is an enigma. In this work we can clearly see Donkor's engagement with the compositional orthodoxies of canonical so-called Western Art, and his desire to subvert it. Donkor's Andromeda is a fully clothed Black woman, waiting.

See also, *Hailing Frequencies Open*

Andromeda, popular culture

Andromeda is represented in popular culture, either as a (white) character, or a location, including:

- *Clash of the Titans* (1981, remade in 2010), a fantasy movie based on Ancient Greek myth
- *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), a role-playing video game set in 2185, based on a competitive quest to populate the Andromeda galaxy
- *The Andromeda Strain* film (1971) and mini-series (2008), based on a Michael Crichton (1942 – 2008) novel about a disease of extra-terrestrial origin.
- Most amusingly, the Black, gay, male character 'Ronald Wilkerson' (Tituss Burgess) renames himself 'Titus Andromedon' in the comedic Netflix original series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015 – 2019).

Andromeda, HFO

The patient ambiguity of Donkor's Andromeda ignited my fascination with the story behind the myth and the potentially radical possibilities of reinserting an African identity on this Classical character.

Reinserting Andromeda's Blackness, and enfolding her eponymous constellation and galaxy into my practice offers multiple roots into Blackness – astrological (the darkness of space), mythical and geographical. Furthermore, Hailing Frequencies Open is a world building project, within that the genre of space opera (a soap opera set in outer space, in the manner of *Star Trek* etc) is well established.. The act of placing Andromeda within a pantheon of Black women is a restorative and generative gesture, undoing Western art history's whitewashing and estrangement from her from her origin story and inserting her as a potential location for liberatory imaginings; the possibilities this presents are endless.

See also, *Dark Fecundity*.

Andromeda, galaxy, constellation

Hailing Frequencies Open proposes Andromeda (the galaxy) as a potential refuge for the formerly abject and neglected histories of Black women, as well as signifying the reclamation of the myth itself from arts history.

The **Andromeda constellation** is one of 48 listed by Ptolemy (100 – 170AD) and is located north of the celestial equator. It features in Babylonian, Greek, Chinese and Indian astronomy. Twelve of its stars have planets. Its symbolism is the Chained Maiden (constellation-guide.com, 2021, online.). The **Andromeda Galaxy** is in the Andromeda constellation, it is approximately 2.5 million light years from Earth and contains over one trillion stars.

Fig .18 ABIFR (2017), *Claudia Jones Space Station* [Printed poster.]

I find open-source images of the galaxy from NASA Images, which are then distributed through my work – as a backdrop for posters, projections and videos, as seen above in a poster made for the *Claudia Jones Space Station* (2017) (Fig 17)[68]. This poster features the abbreviation 'CJSS' in a bright green colour over a close-up image of the galaxy, it was created using photoshop; different versions using different images of the galaxy were created for the project.

68 I discuss this project in greater detail in The Uses of Design Fiction chapter.

See also, *Dark Fecundity; Hailing Frequencies Open.*

Henrietta Lacks

Fig. 19 Photograph of Henrietta Lacks, date unknown. (Credit Bridgeman Images)

Henrietta Lacks (1920 – 1951) was an African American woman who died of an aggressive form of cervical cancer (malignant epidermoid carcinoma), leaving a husband and five children (Fig 18).

Lacks was treated at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, one of the only hospitals close to her home that treated Black patients at that time. During her treatment, cells were taken from her body and shared amongst the scientific community in the USA and abroad, as was commonplace. There is contention over whether permission was requested from Lacks for these acts.

Her cells are the genesis of the first known immortal cell line, known as HeLa. Unlike most other cells, HeLa doubled in number over a twenty-four our period (Hopkinsmedia.com, 2021, online). They have become the gold standard for biomedical research, used to test the

polio vaccine, in AIDS and cancer research and genetic mapping, amongst other applications, making billions of dollars for the medical sciences industry. The Lacks family were not made aware of the existence of the cell line until 1975. (Skloot, 2010; Washington, 2006.)

Much of the publicly accessible material about the life of Henrietta Lacks derives from Rebecca Skloot's book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010). Some members of the extended Lacks' family dispute the way in which the family have been depicted in the book, and there have been various court cases pertaining to Lacks' legacy in relation to determining recognition and compensation for her family with regards to the book, and the scientific community.[69]

Lacks died impoverished and in great pain, drawing attention to the contrast between the 'scientific and economic immortality of the HeLa cells (and) Lacks' susceptibility to premature death at the age of thirty-one in 1951, and her family's continued poverty' (Womack, 2013, p79.)

HeLa

HeLa cells' 'immortality' means that they reproduce themselves independently, at a rate seen never before, or since. Furthermore, they do not require a glass surface or any type of chemical assistance to grow; scientists found they could 'simply divide until they ran out of culture medium. The bigger the vat of medium, the more the cells grew' (Skloot, 2010, p93).

Rebecca Skloot writes an account of a conversation she had with Howard Jones, the doctor who treated Ms Lacks, fifty years after he found an unusual tumour on her cervix. She relates, 'when I asked if he remembered Henrietta, he laughed. "I could ever forget that tumour," he said, "because it was unlike anything I've ever seen."' (2010, p213).

69 There are numerous articles on these matters, and some claims are on-going. I have accounted for this in the bibliography.

This presented lucrative opportunities for scientists and for the biochemical industry – cell cultures are needed for a range of scientific experiments.[70] Cell cultures and cloning technology developed using HeLa led to medical advances including the ability to isolate 'stem cells, cloning whole animals, and in vitro fertilization….as the standard human cell in most labs, HeLa was also being used in research that would advance (the) field of human genetics' (Skloot, 2010, p100.) Science has yet to find an answer as to why HeLa cells are immortal. Immortality in cell lines is now achievable if exposed to certain stimuli (virus', chemicals) but 'very few cells have become immortal on their own as Henrietta's did.' (Skloot, 2010, p194)

Skloot's book became a sensation, winning the *National Academies Communication Award*[71] in 2011 and the *Wellcome Trust Book Prize*, among others. The paperback edition spent 75 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

The book has also entered into the realm of science fiction film; there is a scene in Alex Garland's underrated *Annihilation* (2018) (itself about the impact of genetic mutation) where the main character (a geneticist played by Israeli-American actor Natalie Portman) is seen reading it. Skloot's book is the basis of a television drama of the same name, executive produced by – and staring – Oprah Winfrey (as Lacks' daughter Deborah), for HBO in 2017.

Hela; Tuskegee; race

Johns Hopkins hospital was endowed to provide 'millions of dollars of free care to the poor, many of them black' (Skloot, 2010, p167.) It was also the home of the notorious Tuskegee syphilis study (1932 – 1972) where, buoyed by the belief that Black people were a 'notoriously syphilis-soaked race' (Skloot, 2010, p50), US Public Health Service researchers at the Tuskegee Institute recruited hundreds of Black men and 'watched them die, even

70 The first for profit, industrial scale cell distribution center, Microbiological Associates, was created on the back of HeLa cell production. (Skloot, 2010, pg101). Skloot also reveals that at time of writing there were over seventeen thousand patents involving HeLa cells, which sold for between $100 to almost $10,000 per vial. (Skloot, 2010, p194)

71 Administered by the Keck Futures Initiative, the National Academies Communication Award of $20,000 recognizes works that help public understanding of scientific subjects.

after they realized penicillin could cure them' (Skloot, 2010, pg50). Around 600 men were subjects of the study; 399 who had syphilis, 201 who were 'chosen to serve as controls' (Reverby,2000, pg1). As Washington (2006), Cooper Owens (2017) and Yusoff (2018) have demonstrated, the scientific community used Black bodies to conduct experiments without the patient's knowledge – they were led to believe they were being treated for 'bad blood.' The men 'did not consider themselves subjects as they did not know the study existed' (Reverby, 2000, pg1.)[72]

HeLa, race

Experiments such as this[73] are part of the ignoble, racist history of the collision between Black bodies and white scientists that has been on-going since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. McKittrick reminds us that race is 'socially produced yet differently lived via á vis structural inequalities…the application of science can and does adversely shape the lives of women poor and nonwhite communities' (McKittrick, 2021, p131.) Whilst science as a system of knowledge, 'socially produces what it means to be biologically human it is also the epistemological grounds through which racial and sexual essentialism is registered and lived' (McKittrick, 2021, p131.) The families and communities affected by Tuskegee represent what McKittrick refers to as 'blackness as less-than-human' (McKittrick, 2021, p135.)

Ironically, the Tuskegee Institute, a prestigious Black University at this point, was the site of the first HeLa factory, 'a massive operation that would grow to produce trillions of HeLa cells each week' (Skloot, 2010, p96), led by a team of African American scientists in 1952. By this time the cells were being produced as part of the fight against polio in which they played a crucial role (Hopkins Medicine, 2019).

72 Imagine the impact on families - children, partners etc. - needlessly being infected with the deadly disease.

73 There is a great deal of scholarly work on the Tuskegee Study, from insider accounts such as Fred D. Gray's *The Tuskegee Syphilis Study: The Real Story and Beyond* (1998) to journal articles such as *Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Stud*y (Alan M. Brandt, 1978)

By the 1960 'the general public could grow HeLa at home using instructions from a 'Scientific American' do-it-yourself article' (Skloot, 2010, p137). This enters HeLa further into the realm of science fiction (specifically the 'body horror' genre[74]). Estranged from her body, her cells (or if you like, her cells' offspring) are commoditized and, sold as a fun, at home experiment.

This version of body horror is Dark Fecundity monetized by big business for a public's appetite for consumption and reproduction of the 'product' of an impoverished, Black woman's body. Within the context of the historical mistreatment of Black women's bodies, it is conceptually monstrous.

Ytasha Womack considers the story of HeLa from a legal perspective. For Womack, it is not 'about claiming inalienable rights for cells derived from human bodies such as Lacks'' (but instead) drawing our attention to 'how thoroughly the very core of pure biological matter is framed by neoliberal market logics and by liberal ideas of personhood as property' (Womack, 2013, p81.)

See also, *body horror; Dark Fecundity*

HeLa, space travel

HeLa cells were the first human materials sent into Space, aboard the Korabl-Sputnik 2 satellite by the Soviet Union in 1960 (Pultarova, 2013.) As part of the scientific culture of sharing new advances, HeLa cells were distributed to scientists from the Soviet Union, who won the Space race against the United States and sent HeLa cells in their second satellite. HeLa went up in NASA's *Discoverer XVIII* (1960) satellite shortly thereafter.

74 TV Tropes (2019) defines body horror as 'any kind of horror involving body parts, parasitism, disfigurement, mutation, or unsettling bodily configuration, not induced by immediate violence.' Examples include films such as *The Fly* (1986) and *Alien* (1979).

In space, what scientists 'found was disturbing: in mission after mission, non-cancerous cells grew normally in orbit, but HeLa became more powerful, dividing faster with each trip' (Skloot, 2010, p137.) Skloot's quote was appropriated for the sound track to the sculpture, *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II (2019)*, which is described in greater detail later in this chapter[75]. HeLa's reproducibility has alarmed people in myriad ways; this is Dark Fecundity in action.

See also, *Hailing Frequencies Open; Dark Fecundity.*

HeLa, body horror

According to Alexander Weheliye, a small number of scientists (he cites two in particular) believe HeLa is 'no longer human' something he regards as sounding 'like science fiction' (Weheliye, 2014, p215.) What does it mean when the descendants of dubiously collected Black woman's genetic material can be described as 'no longer human'? The idea that Black humanity can become 'something else' haunts Hailing Frequencies Open; how might this dehumanisation be reimagined, reconstituted?

For Womack, the 'ongoing narrative of the eternal life of HeLa cells prove… that the hieroglyphics of the flesh subsists even in death… now... transposed from the outwardly detectable to the microscopic interior of the human' (Womack, 2013, p79.) This is the language of science fiction, and Womack deepens this observation by citing Reynaldo Anderson (one of the architects of Afrofuturism 2.0) and his use of the alien abduction metaphor in his conception of 'otherness.' As quoted in conversation with Womack, Anderson says, "We're among the first alien abductees, kidnapped by strange people who take us over by ships and conduct scientific experiments on us." (Womack, 2013, pp34-35). Anderson also uses the analogy of SF horror films, which brings Womack back to Lacks' story.

The use of the alien abduction metaphor –places us within the realm of body horror – is not unusual among Black futurists. It haunts the work of many early Afrofuturists such as

75 The scripted soundtrack was exhibited during the exhibition, 'Rewriting the Future' at Site Gallery (2019.)

musician-philosopher DJ Spooky (1970-) and the legendary Detroit electronic music duo Drexiya (1992 – 2002), for example. It can also be found in the short story *The Space Traders* (1992) by Derrick Bell (which later became part of the 1994 TV film *Cosmic Slop*). In this tale, an alien race arrives on Earth and offers the US government advanced technologies in exchange for their Black population.[76] I also reference roots reggae music and songs such as Peter Tosh's *400 Years* (1979), that so strongly evokes the very *strangeness* of the impact of temporal alienation from the Mother Continent, and the spiritual longing that is so resonant within the Jamaican culture.

HeLa, therefore, adds another layer of complexity and becomes a shorthand for centuries of reference to legitimate fears (of the impact of scientific experimentation on Black bodies), and paradoxically, to the wonder of Dark Fecundity.

See also, *Dark Fecundity*.

Dark Fecundity

Fig. 20 Sonya Dyer (2019). *Dark Fecundity* [Printed postcard]. Commissioned by A-Z

76 John Sayles' beautiful film *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984), about a Black alien who crash lands in Harlem, also works within this schema. Additionally, Dery explores this in his essay *Black to the Future* (Dery,1994, p180)

Dark Fecundity is the beginning and end of all things; Blackness as uncontrollable reproducibility, Blackness as the Darkness of space; Blackness as refuge; Black womanhood as a generative source of multiple futures.

Dark Fecundity eschews the hero journey, instead encouraging connection, association and transformation. It not only acted as a *carrier or container* during enslavement (where Black women were literally bred for profit, but not allowed to mother their own children) and the colonial era, but also fed into contemporary urban myths such as Ronald Reagan's Welfare Queen.[77] Dark Fecundity is represented by immortal cells, space travel, transformative action and is astrological. It expresses itself in art, science, nature and life.

See also - *HeLa, Uhura, Nyota; Nichols, Nichelle, Andromeda.*

Rewriting the Future

The work under discussion here is my final PhD submission, which took the form of an installation within a group exhibition *Rewriting the Future,* at Site Gallery, Sheffield, UK, featuring Victoria Sin, Ursula Mayer and Sophia Al Maria and myself. The exhibition ran from 27th September 2019 – 26th January 2020.

The curatorial premise of the exhibition was very much in tandem with the idea that 'science fiction properly conceived.. is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on' (LeGuin, 1996, p154*),* which is an instructive way of understanding my thought process and way of working as explored in this thesis.

This exhibition marked the first public iteration of Hailing Frequencies Open, my ongoing body of work which began in 2018, after embracing the failure of *aPOCalypso* to

77 An 'unworthy' social welfare recipient, depicted as degenerate, lazy and dependent on the state; coded as Black, demonized by the press, and via public policy in the USA, particularly in the 1980s. The true story behind the person first deemed the Welfare Queen, Linda Taylor, is much more complex. See, for example, this interview with Josh Levin, author of a book on Taylor: https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-true-story-behind-the-welfare-queen-stereotype [Last accessed 27/12/19]

encapsulate my intentions. HFO is based around a fictive mythology that positions Black women as progenitors of the future. It is driven by a trilogy of influences –

- The dubious legacy of HeLa cells as pertains to the historical exploitation of the Black body by so-called Western science, in addition to HeLa's neglected historical position as the first human materials sent into space.
- Andromeda, the Aethiopian princess of Greek mythology, as well as the constellation and galaxy in her name
- Nichelle Nichols as a pioneer in the field of space science and scientific cultural imagination, for her role as 'Nyota Uhura' in Star Trek as a pioneer of diversity at NASA.

I am developing a mythos wherein HeLa cells are still in space and headed towards the Andromeda galaxy. Andromeda becomes a potential place of refuge and possibility for new forms of living and being. Nichols's determination to 'go boldly' (to paraphrase the infamous *Star Trek* lore) is the metaphorical engine driving the development of these potentialities. I am creating 'visionary fiction' (Imirisha, 2015.) Andromeda is also representative of the dark, vast, unknowability of space, it's Dark Fecundity.

Installation

Fig. 21 Sonya Dyer, Rewriting the Future exhibition (installation view) (2019). [Video]

The large gallery space was divided into four sections to effectively create an exhibition space for each artist, my work was in the far left towards the back of the space. Prior to entering the space the viewer is faced with a wall of sound, a soundtrack I created using composer, bandleader and renowned harpist Alice Coltrane's *Andromeda's Suffering* (1972), which I licensed from her record company. Overlaid was a spoken text, a variation of the trilogy story, including quotations relating to HeLa cells reproducibility, which I discuss later in this text. On the left-hand side was one of three large wall mounted plasmas screens, playing four videos made in conversation with Black women scientists.

Fig. 22 Sonya Dyer (2019), *Rewriting the Future* exhibition (installation view) [Video, sculpture] (Credit: Jules Lister.)

The visitor is immediately greeted by a large flat screen featuring Dr Chanda Prescod - Weinstein, directly ahead is Dr Hadiya-Nicole Green and Dr Miranda Lowe. As we turn right we find the remaining video with Dr Elizabeth Opara. The videos are named in same format, e.g. *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Chanda Prescod-Weinstein* (2019), and so on.

In the centre of the space, is the sculpture, *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (2019), also the location of the sound.

Fig. 23 Sonya Dyer *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (2019). [Sculpture].

Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II (2019), a 6ft tall sculpture, is suspended from the ceiling (Fig 22). The sculpture takes the form of a prototype space vessel, inspired by natural and mechanical forms, as well as early NASA and Soviet space vessels. One can see traces of tentacles, scales as well as unidentified 'instruments.' The vessel is painted in Superblack 2.0 paint, created by artist Stuart Semple.[78] The deep Blackness of the paint is an important aesthetic and conceptual concern for the work, there are layers of Darkness involved.

78 The paint was created as a repost to Anish Kapoor's creation of a super dense black paint that only he could use. Semple has banned Kapoor from purchasing his paint. Semple has subsequently created a 3.0 version - even more dense – but that wasn't available in sufficient quantities to use in this instance.

It is one of an anticipated three sculptural spaceships I will make as part of this work, each names after one of named enslaved women Sims experimented on. The shadows – created by manipulating the gallery lighting – are also part of the work. They cause *Anarcha* to multiply, another variation of Dark Fecundity.

I chose Coltrane's *Andromeda's Suffering* (1972) as part of the installation for several reasons. Firstly, I believe it to be a wonderful piece of music; Coltrane is a hugely important influence on my work, and for many other Black futurists. She creates expansive sonic landscapes influenced by her Hinduism, Black American cultural invention (particularly jazz), and the psychodelia associated with 1960s-70's counter culture, to which she was an undervalued contributor. I am also intrigued by the fact that she engaged with the story of Andromeda, and that her contribution to the mythos was via empathy *for* Andromeda – she placed her experience centre stage.

The track combines 25 different string instruments and a jazz ensemble, with Coltrane playing piano and harp. The dramatic qualities Coltrane infuses in the song rise and fall; my text aimed to ride its waves and match its urgency.

The script I wrote to accompany the sound, sculpture and video expands the broader conceptual universe the works are situated within. I wanted to find a way to imbed the broader world building into the experience of the installation. To a certain extent, I was influenced by audio tours of museum exhibitions, and other interpretation material – materials that provide further context for visitors. In the spirit of Dark Fecundity, I wanted the track to further complicate and contextualise the installation by adding another variation of Andromeda by a Black woman to this work.

Additionally, I am curious about how expositional text is used within television and sequential speculative fiction movies (for example the Star Wars trilogies, with their

infamous opening crawl.) I wanted to make this central to bringing the elements together, but more poetically than descriptive.[79]

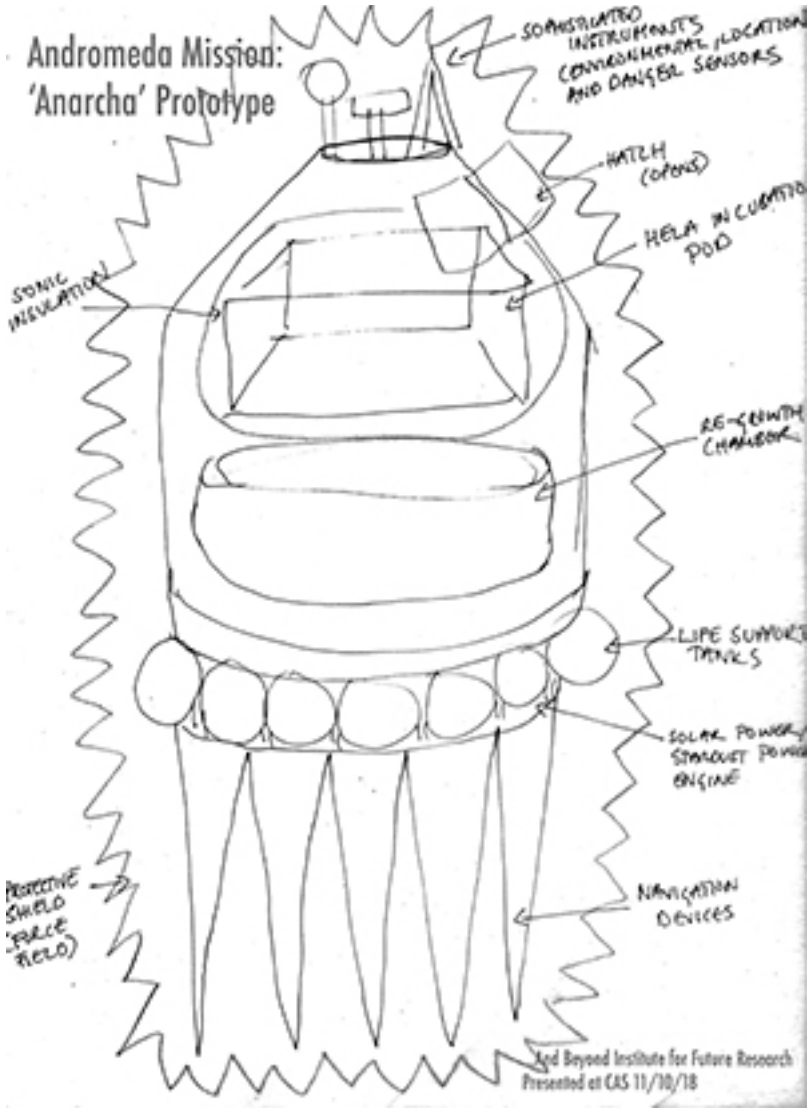

Fig. 24 Sonya Dyer *CAS Invitation* (2018) [Photocopy print on paper].

The sculpture is based on a combination of natural - sea creatures such as octopi, the texture of scales, palm fronds and banana leaf - and unnatural forms including early Space vessels, medical instruments and navigational tools. The work was fabricated based on a drawing I made, which was transformed into a 3D model by the fabricator, this original drawing has now become a print. My initial intension was to 3D print the entire sculpture,

79 The track is attached to the USB stick that accompanies this these, but I am unable to place it on my webpage due to copyright issues.

but that proved prohibitively expensive, and would have proved far too heavy a load for the ceiling. In the end, working with the fabrication shop, a mixture of materials were selected for each component, fibreglass, polyurethane foam, PVC foamboard, MDF, mild steel and Aluminium. The sculpture was then spray painted.

An early prototype of the sculpture was trialled during a residency at the *Centre for Afrofuturist Studies*, based at PS1 in Iowa City, Iowa, USA (Fig 24). There, I used tape to render a drawing I had made of a prototype. I envisaged HeLa cells reproducing in the central chamber, and working their way around the vessel to complete various takes (such as navigating). I imagined them working as a collective, like ants. I also conducted my first scientist interview, with Dr Hadiyah-Nicole Green, which was re-edited for the exhibition at Site Gallery.

The titles of individual video works reinforce the sense that they form part of a broader, ongoing project and that they are each a part of a series. The sculpture and videos are in conversation with each other. The installation is designed so that the videos conceptually accompany the sculpture on her journey to Andromeda.

Fig. 25 Sonya Dyer (2019) *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Chanda Prescod-Weinstein* [Video Still]

In the videos (Fig 25), these Black women scientists from the UK and USA – and incidentally of a diverse range of backgrounds and heritages, commentate on ideas including scientific

ethics, the existence of alien life forms, their relationship to sf, climate change and their particular relationship with HeLa cells, propagating the idea of Black women as producers of knowledge. I see echoes of carrington's description of 'Uhura's supremely competent Black womanhood' (carrington, 2016, p86.)

It is important to recognise their specialities: Dr Lowe is a natural scientist, working at the Natural History Museum, where she is Principal Curator, Crustacea. Dr Opara comes from the field of Sports and Nutrition Science, and is a Head of Department of Applied and Human Sciences at Kingston University, UK. Dr Green works in the field of cancer research, where she has developed a pioneering laser device to treat cancer cells, she is based at Morehouse School of Medicine, an HBCU (Historically Black College and University) in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Dr Prescod-Weinstein is a theoretical physicist and Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy and Core Faculty Member in Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire, USA. This is the beginning of my Greek chorus – I plan to make many more such videos in the years to come.

The format of the videos makes a virtue of the familiar aesthetics of the Skype interface. The interviewee is the main feature, captured in their workplace. I made the decision to edit myself out of the frame, in order to focus on the interview subject, as opposed to my reaction to the conversation; my physical presence felt superfluous. The transposition of the Skype frame against the backdrop of the Andromeda Galaxy – a signature of this body of work – takes the familiar and makes it slightly strange. An animation of the original drawing the sculpture model was based on interrupts the frame, travelling across one way, then the other.

The *Encyclopaedia* section of this text provided context and analysis of the exploitation of the genetic material taken from Henrietta Lacks. Here, I want to reflect further on how I subvert and reconfigure this reality as creative material, and reimagine the scientific exploitation of Black women during enslavement, with particular reference to the experiments of American physician J Marion Sims (1813 – 1883), (regarded by some as the

'father of gynecology,'[80]). Sims experimented on Black women who were enslaved, the names of three of these women are known to us today –Anarcha Westcott, Betsey Harris and Lucy Zimmerman.

I draw a connection between the trade in bodies, genetic material, unimaginable pain and gross profit represented by these three women; the story of HeLa exists within a context where race, sex, class intersect for Black women within a history of abjection.

According to the scholarship of Harriet Washington, Sims bought enslaved women and 'addicted them to morphine in order to perform dozens of exquisitely painful, distressingly intimate vaginal surgeries' (Washington, 2006, p2.) Washington describes – in graphic detail – how each woman would be restrained by force, first by other physicians, then when the doctors 'fled when they could bear the horrific scenes no longer' (2006:2), the other women. Sims is 'revered as a women's benefactor' (2006:61) and often hid the racial background of his subjects to not offend more liberal contemporaries (2006:256.) He also experimented on enslaved women's babies (2006:63.)

I also connect HeLa cells reproducibility with the kinds of reproduction found in Butler's works, where alien and humans merge with differing levels of consent. Academic Allysa Collins (who is a 2021-2022 Octavia E. Butler Fellow at the Huntington Library) refers to this connection between the two as 'cellularity,' describing it as a 'mode of Black feminist survival' (Huntington.org, 2021) which is entire in concert with my practice.

As Dr Elizabeth Opara and Dr Chanda Prescod-Weinstein both discuss in the videos I made with them (which can be access via the instructions in the Appendix.) Black communities knowledge of these monstrous occurrences have a contemporary legacy in mistrust of the medical profession, which can have deleterious health implications.[81] My work aims to

80 There is a biographical account of Sims life entitled, *J. Marion Sims, the Father of Modern Gynecology,* dated 1932.

81 It is worth noting that Johns Hopkins now shares information about Lacks and her impact on science on its website.

reimagine all of these women as progenitors of possible futures, return them to their true dignity; there is an element of reverence, a desire to show the ultimate respect.

My fascination with the myth of Andromeda is in part due to the way it has been, literally, whitewashed within art, as discussed in the Encyclopaedia. I am aware that I read this tale within a contemporary ontological position, therefore a story of a European nation ravaging an African country and kidnapping and chaining a Black woman has a particular resonance in a post-Trans-Atlantic enslavement context. I remind myself that the Greeks did not have the contemporary sense of Black and white – this is a relatively recent invention, normalised during the Enlightenment period - and that they were merely describing the world (and nations) surrounding them. Effectively, this world is pre-race, as we know it.

Andromeda becomes useful in thinking about a time before (and beyond) race, but also can be read contemporaneously as a reaction from whiteness to the presence of Black beauty. What I am interested in is – at its source – the story of Andromeda is that of an African woman, daughter of the rulers of her land.

On Monumentalism

A key consideration within the work is the question of the monument - who achieves public remembrance, and why? Equally important is the historical relationship between medical experimentation and the Black body[82] as discussed in this chapter.

My work is also engaged with thinking through what a monument can be at this point in time, particularly what a monument whose aim is to reignite memories of neglected subjectivities. I think of the sculpture *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II (2019)* as part of my on-going explorations of what a *living monument* might be. In order to unravel the term living monument I will first briefly discuss some key theoretical and artistic responses to the notion of the counter-monument, as it relates to my practice.

82 The emphasis of my research is the female body, but this history applies to all genders.

I am drawn to the idea of the living monument, of igniting a situation (which could be an installation, or a live work, for example), wherein the monument is not just a site for remembrance, but of anticipating the future. For the *Claudia Jones Space Station* (2017) (also referred to as CJSS), I used the idea of the space station as a form – a place where different experiments or experiences co-existed, and where community might be formed in ephemeral ways. The monument occurred in a series of gallery spaces at The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts and The NewBridge Project in Newcastle / Gateshead, UK. Working with groups and individuals who were active in the local community, the CJSS was an attempt to actively – and collectively - remember the activist Claudia Jones (1915 - 1964). Jones was herself a bridge between the Caribbean, USA and the UK, between Black activism, housing rights activism and journalism. This project represents an earlier stage of my work, during the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* era. Whilst I no longer work in this relational way, it is clear that I have carried the idea of rethinking the monument with me into the current era.

The term 'counter-monument' is credited to James Young, arising from his work in the early nineteen nineties on the visibility and invisibility (or absence and presence) of Germany's Holocaust remembrance monuments.[83] In a text for Harvard Design Magazine, Young suggests that it is as if 'once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember' (Young, 1999.)

Sabrina DeTurk suggests a counter monument can be thought of as 'complicating the act of remembering something messy, challenging that provokes its viewers' (DeTurk, 2017). Temporality is an important consideration according to DeTurk, as a counter monument does not 'stay neatly within bounds of space or time but calls our attention to the ongoing work of memory and to those lapses of memory that threaten to compromise our reckoning with the past' (DeTurk, 2017.) I am drawn to connecting this theorisation with Eshun's 'countermemory' (Eshun, 2003) device discussed in the Methodology chapter. Archaeologist

83 Young, J. E. *The Counter Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today* (1992) *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter, 1992), pp. 267-296. Young expanded on this theory in subsequent texts, particularly within the field of Architecture.

James Osbourne argues that counter-monumentality illustrates how 'the erection of monuments exposes the inherent fragility of memory' (Osbourne, 2017.)

These are all useful considerations for my practice, as I seek to transform the 'fragility of memory' (even the cultural memory of fictional tales, such as Andromeda) into a proposition for a reimagined future. Arguably, this relation between memory (or, forgetting), provocation and fragility reaches its apotheosis in the Monuments Must Fall movement.

Monuments Must Fall is a development of *Rhodes Must Fall*, a movement arising from student protests about the existence of a statue of British Imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in March 2015 (and by proxy, monuments of colonial figures in general). Activism agitating for the statue's removal resonated with social justice movements around the world – particularly within educational institutions such as Oxford University.[84] The movement expanded to encompass protest against monuments dedicated to Confederate soldiers from the United States Civil War (1961-65)[85], as well as other European colonial figures.

Nicolas Mirzoeff describes Confederate monuments as 'no longer "unseen"' (Mirzoeff, 2017), reflecting the ways in which monuments have become increasingly weaponized (and thus increasingly visible) by white nationalists (as symbols of a supposedly imperilled heritage) and by decolonial activists. Mirzoeff, articulates these statues operate as 'material nodes in the network of white supremacy… the visible form of the established order of racial hierarchy' (Mirzoeff, 2017.)[86]

84 A publicly accessible *All Monuments Must Fall* curriculum has been developed out of the movement.

85 Activist Heather Heyer was murdered during a protest against a monument to Confederate Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville on 12th August 2017,

86 It is worth noting that some of these statues have subsequently been forcibly removed by activists. Others been relocated or removed from public view. Most remain in place.

Typically, these statues present the white, male heroic figure on a horse, or standing in an authoritative position, an obvious attempt to reconstitute a form of visual signifier redolent of Ancient Rome (and claim historically inaccurate ownership of the legacy of Rome as a precursor to contemporaneous white supremacy). The anti-LeGuin. I am interested in the 'new work' (Mirzoeff, 2017) these statues are doing to 'naturalize the connection between white supremacy and war' (Mirzoeff, 2017) and the impact of the work of, in particular, a number of Black artists in countering this message through public monuments. Here, a discuss a few specifically working with the Black, female figure.

Fig. 26 Simone Leigh (2019), *Brick House* [Sculpture]. (Credit: High Line Art).

Brick House (Simone Leigh, 2019) is a monumental 16ft tall bronze sculpture (Fig 26) of a Black woman's head, with a skirt inspired by Leigh's on-going interest in forms of clay house developed in various parts of West Africa (including Benin, Togo and Cameroon) and a restaurant called *Mammy's Cupboard* in Mississippi.

Commissioned for the High Line in New York, USA, Brick House's sheer monumentality renders it a highly charged experience. On a research trip to NYC, I found walking towards the High Line, on 10th Avenue and 30th Street – Brick House in the distance – akin to undertaking a pilgrimage. The combination of influences behind the work provide a bridge between the so-called Old World and New World via diaspora – the Black Atlantic[87] reconstituted as the head of a woman, in prime real estate. Leigh is quoted as saying, *"What a better place to put a Black female figure...Not in defiance of the space, exactly, but to have a different idea of beauty there."* (High Line Art, 2019.) *Brick House* is overwhelming, a countermonument as counter memory, perhaps.

Fig. 27 Ehlers, Belle (2018). *I Am Queen Mary* [Sculpture]. (Credit: NYT.)

I Am Queen Mary (2018) (Fig 27) by Danish artist Jeanette Ehlers and Virgin Islands artist La Vaughn Belle is a large-scale public sculpture featuring the seated figure of Queen Mary (Mary Thomas), one of the leaders of the 1878 labour revolt in the then Danish colony of St Croix in the Caribbean (Fig 27).

87 I am referring to the term coined by Paul Gilroy in his 1995 book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.*

Formally, *I Am Queen Mary* is composed in a similar manner to the infamous photograph of Black Panther Huey Newton taken by Blair Stapp, seated in a rattan chair with a rifle in one hand, and a spear in the other [88]. Queen Mary holds a torch and a cane bill.

The monument was originally temporarily located at Toldbodgade 40 in Copenhagen, Denmark (at time of writing, it is out for repair; it is unclear where it will next be situated). To quote the artists, 'by speaking her humanity into existence she stakes her claim on the site and reshapes the narratives for future generations' (Ehlers, Belle, 2018.) Ehlers and Belle explicitly cite *I Am Queen Mary* as part of an African tradition of call and response, in reference to 'many resistance movements and traditions '(Ehlers, Belle, 2018.) I would argue that both of these works are similarly engaged, calling and responding to diasporic subjects, to the history between Africa and Europe of the past 400 plus years and to each other. It is significant that they have all been on display within the same time period, and within the context of the global Must Fall movement.

Andromeda Mission: Anarcha II (2019) is not a public sculpture; it was made for display within an exhibition setting. It is also not figurative; I do not intend to make figurative sculpture. Nonetheless I place the sculpture not only in conversation with my previous living monuments and other ephemeral works, but engaged in a process of call-and-response with the works cited above.

The essential questions are, what is a monument? How do we account for forgotten or neglected histories? How can we find a place for complex depictions of Blackness within public space? How do we reshape narratives for future generations, as Ehlers and Belle propose? Like Leigh, I am not primarily interested in building a body of work that works as a protest (that is, having a reflexive, defensive relationship to white hegemony), but producing a counter-narrative with a greater sense of agency.

88 The famous Newton image was allegedly also the inspiration for the throne of the character 'Black Panther', in the Marvel cinematic film of the same name (2018).

Perhaps that is why I am drawn to the idea of the living monument, a proposition that looks to and anticipates the future, that aims to bring the future into being. I am reminded of British artist Jem Finer's work *Longplayer* (1999-), a thousand-year long music composition, which began playing on 21st December 1999, and is due to play, without repetition, until the end of 2999. At that point, the work will begin again.

I find *Longplayer* incredibly moving and instructive because it is predicated on the belief that humanity will still be here in the distant future. That future-humans will recognise sound, and perhaps even still have art. In order to support the work, the Longplayer Trust has been created as, 'a linage of present and future custodians…. to seek solutions for an unknown future' (Longplayer.org, 2019.)

Like Finer, and unlike Leigh, Ehlers and Belle, I am interested in what happens when the body is removed, in creating a kind of incorporeal phenomenology. I envisage a future where the video works in this body of work are catalogued in some kind of library, and the sculpture (and future sculptures) stand in place of forgotten or neglected bodies and subjectivities. Strange forms emanating strange sounds, both human and non-human, dense, super Black and light as feathers. I wonder how far – and for how long – stories might travel, and what, in the end, might be remembered.

THE USES OF DESIGN FICTION

This chapter will provide a detailed narrative history of the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* (*ABIFR*).[89] This includes an account of a commission at Primary, Nottingham in 2015 and other works, in addition to engaging with broader questions arising from so-called socially engaged practice, collaboration and the performance lecture as a form.

What was ABIFR?

The *ABIFR* was a peripatetic think tank creating possible futures. For the majority of this research project my practice was largely discursive and moving image based, channelled through the think tank. This involved creating pseudo-infomercials, illustrated titles and screening films (including documentaries) about notable figures. The *ABIFR* – and by extension this PhD – arose from my enduring interest and engagement with speculative fiction, Afrofuturism and other Black futurisms, and the representation of Black women in the futures depicted in visual art and visual culture (or the lack thereof), as explored in the *Methodology* chapter.

It is useful to consider *ABIFR* in detail, as some of the ideas explored during this era have endured in my current practice, just in a different form. Furthermore, this chapter provides further contextualisation of the ways in which my critical and artistic engagement with ideas of futurity have developed over time.

The *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* was think tank as artistic proposition, engaged with the practice of research as a public act and creating possible futures. The Institute drew upon a range of experiences and talents, through reimaging space travel (including its genealogy) by centring Black female subjectivities and contributions. I considered the think tank as a playful form that allowed for the presentation and dissemination of knowledge within the context of visual art. It was not my intention to, for example, create actionable reports for government. Instead, I was interested in what might happen if a single person – myself – took claimed institutional authority, whilst working with

89 I will use both the full title and the abbreviation at different points during this chapter.

other institutions and individuals. It was designed to be disruptive to the idea of the artist as a singular knowledge generating being (returning to LeGuin's rejection of the singular hero again); as such it was essentially performative. I wanted to privilege forms of distribution that included the anecdote, the story, the informal. I additionally enjoyed the sense of distance the think tank as a device gave me, as I was still trying to work out what exactly my practice was.

This premise owes much to hakim bey's notion of the 'temporary autonomous zone' (Bey,1991, p2) and other forms of Utopian thinking, fictional and non-fictional. In addition, I was interested in the ways in which think tanks operate as organizational structures concerned with the production, propagation and advocacy of forms of knowledge. I was interested in disseminating ideas within the public realm that seek to shift consciousness and understanding of the terms under which the future might be constructed, or more specifically, centring Black women. I wondered how a think tank might be employed in the service of the imagination. These questions are further expanded upon in the chapter The Potential of The Think Tank.

I wanted to see if *ABIFR* could provide space for me to integrate disparate aspects of my practice into a cohesive hole. My work has traditionally been research-based and I can spend up to five years just conducting research before making a substantive body of work. At the early stages of the nascent think tank's development, around 2012, I began to consider this research *as* my work. Continuing my long-standing interest in public research as a form of practice (first developed during *The Paul Robeson Research Station*[90]), the think tank became a place where I could test my ideas in public through my practice. With hindsight, I would say that my idea of what the think tank was is connected to Le Guin's 'carrier bag' (Le Guin, 1986) as discussed throughout this thesis.

90 'The Paul Robeson Research Station,' took place in 2017 at Site Gallery Sheffield. In addition to an exhibition of new work, the project also operated as a hub of information about Robeson and his connections to other artists and figures from the early 20th century international socialism movement, and included screenings, discussions and a library.

I had previously worked with, and been approached by, various think tanks as a writer impacting discussions around arts policy and precarious art labour, and I had a strong understanding of the role they play in civil society. My ambition was to consider whether the propagandising potential of the think tank could be utilised as an artwork.

The work produced by *ABIFR* should therefore be seen as building a body of public knowledge, which arises from the visual arts. It utilised my curatorial and organisational skills, in addition to my visual and performative art works.

Branding

As part of its early branding, *ABIFR*[91] commissioned artist Larry Achiampong to create the *ABIFR* theme tune using sounds from the NASA sound archive. Achiampong produced two versions, one using ambient space sounds, the other featuring a female voice performing a space countdown-type sequence. The theme tune/s were utilized in some form during many *ABIFR* public events – as ambient music in the background or as the background music to infomercials and a radio project. This signature sound was the first building block in my efforts to create a recognizable aesthetic infrastructure for the think tank.

The *ABIFR* also had a logo and a tagline - 'We make the future' - which was attached to all work produced. In the chapter 'The Potential of the Think Tank' I explore the history and utility of the think tank in greater detail, including examples of other art projects that manifest in think tank-style structures. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at some key projects undertaken by the *ABIFR*.

Intersections

The *ABIFR* was commissioned by Primary, an Arts Council England RFO (Regularly Funded Organisation) in the autumn of 2014.

91 It is worth noting here that between 2012 and 2018, I requested all commissioning organizations to do so via *ABIFR*. Equally, *ABIFR* commissioned or recruited other collaborators, not me as an individual.

Primary 'provides an open environment for artistic research and production… offering artists the freedom to take risks and experiment with new work' (Primary, 2019.) In addition to curating exhibitions and public realm projects the building also hosts artists' studios, two artist-led private galleries and a bakery. It is located in an old school building in a residential street in Nottingham. It positions itself as 'providing new ways for local and international audiences to engage with contemporary art.' (Primary, 2019). The commission came with an open brief although it derived from *Intersections*, a strand of their programming focused on non-exhibition-based artist's projects that engage (in the broadest sense) with the wider community.

In addition to Arts Council England Funding, *Intersections* was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, which aims to 'improve quality of life throughout the UK (and to) unlock and enable potential back the unorthodox and unfashionable, build collective networks and catalyse system change' (Esmee Fairbairn, 2016) through funding initiatives in the fields of Arts, Children and Young People, Environment, Social Change, Food and Social Investment. The social remit of funders is something I will return to later in this paper - acknowledging the socio-political conditions of funding for the project provides useful context.

I decided to recruit a group of local women in order to explore potential together. The commission at Primary ran for nine months (extended from the original six months), from January – September 2015.

I wanted to use the commission as an opportunity to test out some ideas for how *ABIFR* might work in a collaborative setting, specifically with a group of women who would not necessarily regard themselves as artists. More broadly, a critical, reoccurring question for my research was – how can a think tank operate as an art project? What are its particular qualities?

At this point, my primary aim was to position women as progenitors of a future Space programme, in order to consider collective female endeavour as a creative force leading the construction of the future. That is, *ABIFR* utilized the think tank as form to place the artistic

and intellectual labour of women (particularly Black women) at the centre of how the future is envisaged and experienced in the present.[92] Such thinking may be deemed utopian, which to a large degree is a reading I resisted. It was not my belief that a female-led future would necessarily be positive (or negative); I wanted to explore the subversive and liberatory potentiality of brining the margin to the centre, of framing Black women as progenitors of potentially radical futures, as explored in the Methodology and Encyclopaedia chapters.

Locating Site

As a visitor to Nottingham, I was mindful of the politics of bringing artists in from elsewhere to work with a 'local community'; it is an often-problematic practice that characterizes so much dialogical/project-based work. [93]

As *ABIFR* was designed to be peripatetic, this necessitated a deeper reading of notions of site, location and place in relation to art practice. Miwon Kwon theorises that this form of work 'no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process.. the guarantee of a specific relationship between an artwork and its 'site' is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship…but rather on the recognition of its unfixed impermanence, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation' (Kwon, 1997, p37.)

Kwon proposes that a work's relationship with location is intimately connected with the social conditions of the institutional set up (also as site), both are 'subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate' (1997:37.) This suggests an inter-textual – as opposed to spatial – 'site' and 'its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions

92 It wasn't feasible to focus my attention on Black women specifically within the context of this commission in Nottingham, for demographic and organizational reasons amongst others. It was also incredibly affirmative to work with a group of women who were 'diverse' in other ways – nationality, age etc.

93 Sophie Hope's *Critical Friends* is an example of a contemporaneous project that critically engaged with the politics of commissioning with communities. Available at: https://criticalfriends.sophiehope.org.uk/ (Last accessed 2/8/21). *Peckham Platform* is another example of self-reflexive commissioner, working with members of the local community to select artists. Available at: http://www.peckhamplatform.com/ (Last accessed 2/8/21)

through spaces…a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist' (1997:39.)

If one accepts this reading, does this suggest that *ABIFR* was not temporarily based in Nottingham at all, instead remaining an intangible, online project that merely passed through the city? Or does it 'reside' solely within my body (or indeed my hard drive?)

Recruitment

My early practice was predicated on the creation of communities of choice for either the production or reception of work. For example the *Paul Robeson Research Station* (Site Gallery, 2011) was activated by a belief that the audience would find the work – the legacy of the international socialist network that Paul Robeson himself was a part of. My own upbringing was within an area heavily implicated in the history of the working-class British / International left and the pre/post war anti-colonial movement. I had a strong belief that the networks that sustain the memory of this historical moment could be activated to provide a significant part of the 'audience' for the exhibition, which proved to be the case.

There are a variety of terminology to describe this type of type of practice including 'dialogical aesthetics' (Kester, 2005), '(SEA) or socially engaged art' (Helguera, 2011), or 'social practice' which, to quote Gregory Sholette, 'treats the social itself as a medium and material of expression' (Sholette, 2017, p216.)

I recognise that when I was working in this way I did not have a strong ideological connection to any particular terminology; it just was not important to me. With the benefit of hindsight these were the type of opportunities that were available to me at the time.

A significant part of the first half of the project was spent recruiting collaborators. I specifically wanted to work with women, to develop the idea – central to the *ABIFR* – of the think tank as a site for knowledge production generated by collective female intellectual labour.

Fig. 25 ABIFR (2015) *Flyer for Primary* [Printed photocopy on paper]. (Credit: ABIFR)

To this end, I created posters, flyers and web copy that were distributed around Nottingham by the gallery. I set up a series of exploratory workshops to introduce myself, the project and interested parties to each other. I also took part in a radio interview on local radio station *Kemet FM* (*ABIFR*, 2015) to disseminate information about the project.

Fig. 26 ABIFR, (2015) *Press Conference* [Performance]. Credit: ABIFR)

I performed a press conference, in the gallery space at Primary. The idea was still quite nascent, with hindsight there was a relative lack of clarity as to what exactly the project *was*. I did not know yet; for me, knowing derives from action, followed by reflection. The press conference was staged so that the audience entered the space with the *ABIFR* theme tune (composed by Achiampong) playing in the background. I then projected the first *ABIFR* infomercial, which featured images of fictional and non-fictional women astronauts and explorers and text, which also featured the theme tune.)

I delivered a statement about the *ABIFR* and our mission in Nottingham, followed by a Q&A. The audience were lively and engaged and it definitely accelerated a process of engagement with the broader cultural life of the city – connections made here lead to press interviews, introductions to various groups (Nottingham Women's Centre, Nottingham Writers Cooperative, and most notably the Horizon Digital Economy Research Institute, who ended up being the main funders of the final events.)

I also visited Nottingham Hackspace, where I made my first recruit – Person A, a woman with a brilliant background in technology, who wanted to develop her art practice and primarily worked as a homemaker.

The Performance Lecture

The performance lecture as a distinct form has its roots in the 1960's performance and conceptualism, fusing academia, performativity and visual art. It should be seen as distinct from theatre.

Fig. 27 Martha Rosler (1975), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* [Video Still]. (Credit EAI)

My work with this form has been particularly influenced by Coco Fusco and Martha Rosler, whose *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) was a formative work for me as an undergraduate with its exploration of the performance of femininity, domesticity and female rage. Coco Fusco's *Observation of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr Zira* (2013) is another profoundly influential work. Taking the role of 'Dr Zira,' a highly esteemed chimp psychologist from the film series *Plant of the Apes* (1968 – 73), Fusco remains in character, as she anthropologies the follies of human behaviour and our tendency towards inequality and violence. Fusco's incursion into speculative fiction is instructive to my own – utilizing speculation to speak to her long engagement with colonial behaviours.

Fig. 28 *Observation of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr Zira* (2013), Coco Fusco. (Credit: Noah Krell)

Part of the work's power lies in its stagecraft, the combination of a conventional setting for a talk of this nature – inside a room, with visual materials, a lectern and so on – and the peculiarity of the person giving the lecture. In 'real-life' apes do not speak! Fusco's understanding of the impact of placing the strange with the mundane appeals to me. We have to accept this protagonist as she is, suspending disbelief in the way sf requires us to. It is not so much that I sought to replicate this effect, more that Fusco opened my eyes to the range of possibilities within the lecture format.

Performative Pedagogy

I have now come to consider this part of my practice in terms of performative pedagogy, rather than the performance lecture as such. I was first introduced to this term during a tutorial whilst I was in residence at the Bemis Centre for Contemporary Arts, Omaha in 2016.

In order to understand why this shift occurred in my understanding, let us consider what is meant by performative pedagogy. How might performance and teaching combine?

A lecture is – according to the Oxford English Dictionary – either 'an educational talk to an audience, especially one of students in a university, or a long serious speech, especially one given as a scolding or reprimand' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019), whereas pedagogy is the 'method and practice of teaching, especially as an academic subject or theoretical subject' (Lexico.com, 2019.)

Elyse Lamm Pineau – a pioneer in the field - proposes using performance as a 'generative metaphor for educational research' going on to suggest that performative pedagogy 'supplants "information-dispensing" with the negotiation and enactment of possible knowledge claims' (Lamm Pineau, 1994).

A particularly instructive definition of performance is as 'a means of planning a situation where power relations can be explored' (Campbell, 2018.) Both Lamm Pineau and Campbell articulate how I sought to use the format. I wanted to explore the possibilities of distributing information within a recognisable educative format, but through combining fact, fiction, visual, audio-visual and written information and using these tools as a world building exercise.

Fig. 29 ABIFR (2015) *ABIFR Nottingham* [Digital photograph] (Credit: Ben Hariott)

ABIFR Nottingham

The recruitment process gathered considerable momentum after I made a presentation to the Horizon Digital Economy Research Institute at University of Nottingham. I recruited three women from here, including the programme leader. Horizon also contributed more than 50% of the budget for *Into the Future!*, the finale event of the project.

Aside from Person B, the Horizon programme leader, the other women were Person C, a senior nurse of Caribbean and English origin undertaking a PhD in the relationship between technology and care provision, and Person D, a young Greek PhD student whose focus was cinema attendance and digital technology. In addition, we were joined by Person E, a Mexican puppeteer and Person F an American from the Business School at Nottingham University (with a background in Asian youth activism in the US). The project curator at Primary also joined the group.

I mention the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the women not as an essentialising impulse, but to provide a sense of the diversity of women who were part of the project. These women became the …*And Beyond Institute for Future Research* for the duration of the project.

The process

I devised the process as an extended form of active listening, drawing on the work of Rogers and Farson originally publishes in 1957 as a form of relational interacting that is ''active' because the listener has a very definite responsibility. He does not passively absorb the words which are spoken to him. He actively tries to grasp the facts and the feelings in what he hears, and he tries, by his listening, to help the speaker work out his own problems' (Rogers, Farson, 1987.) This technique is often utilised within business sector, especially workplace communication. Passive listening involves receiving information presented without interruption (harappa.education, 2021).

Initially, I met most of the women in small groups of one or two, in more intimate workshops designed to create a space for them to get to know me (and vice versa) and to facilitate building an element of trust between us. This wasn't necessary for everyone –

some were more naturally confident – but I found it useful, particularly when it came to integrating the more introverted participants with the extroverts. It meant that I was able to facilitate their involvement based on having knowledge about what they were interested in, and thus able to make connections to others in the group.

We then had several group workshops at Primary where each member of the group was asked to bring an object that they could use to describe their interest in the future. This ranged from books, a photograph of their new-born child, and a memory of a film they had seen. The process became more about facilitating a process of collaborative exchange. It became critical to de-centre my own subject position, whilst still providing a sense of stability and direction so that my collaborators did not feel abandoned.

Through these workshops we developed a few key ideas that we were all interested in; the impact of technology on relationships and the question of what 'tools' would be needed in the future. I worked to move the group towards thinking more about what they wanted to happen, rather than what they thought would happen. I was influenced by my readings of Berardi (2011), as explored in the Methodology chapter. If we could devise a future in our own image, what would we want?

Kester suggests that 'we determine the relationship between our interpretation of another's state of mind or condition and his or her actual inner state through a performative interaction, an empathetic feedback loop in which we observe the other's responses to our statements and actions (and modify our own subsequent actions accordingly.') Kester refers to this as 'empathetic identification' and regards it as a 'necessary component of dialogical art practice (as) it provides a way to decentre a fixed identity through interactions with others.' (all Kester, 2013, p77.) Certainly, this extended workshop process laid the groundwork for the group to function as *ABIFR* Nottingham, as opposed to as a satellite of my practice as an individual.

After these initial meetings, I encountered a dilemma regarding the limitations of the budget. The project had now passed the six-month stage it was initially designed for, and

there was no more budget to pay further fees etc.[94] It was financially difficult to continue to make so many trips to Nottingham (I was visiting for a couple of days up to twice a month at this point.)

The women in the group were very determined to continue to develop the ideas, and so we worked virtually, with them meeting up (sometimes with the project curator) and then keeping in contact with me via Skype, phone or email. We also set up a Googledoc and Padlet to develop ideas collectively. The sense of stability I was keen to provide felt slightly more precarious at points at this stage, but my collaborators had developed their own relationships with each other, and were working well as a team.

In advance of the final event in September 2015, we also participated in a photo shoot as *ABIFR* Nottingham (see above for an example), wherein we used images of space programme promotional images from the mid twentieth century as inspiration. These images were used to advertise the think tanks activities in Nottingham, for press and publicity and as a documentation of the project. Theoretically, they can be thought of as a 'networked aesthetic' (Sholette, 2017, p132) as the performativity of the poses represent a facsimile of a 'real' workers image (in this case, astronauts.)

Collaboration, Service & Dialogical Aesthetics

Here I will discuss the politics and ethics of collaboration and the notion of dialogical aesthetics, focusing particularly on the *Intersections* commission at Primary, Nottingham.

I primarily utilise the work of Grant Kester, Pablo Helguera, Claire Bishop, Miwon Kwon, Larne Abse Gogarty and Andrea Fraser.

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been an explosion of gallery and non-gallery based discursive visual arts practices, and an increasing amount of critical writing on the subject as theorists work to keep up with the discursive turn. Many critics place such

94 My fee was £5,000 for the nine-month duration of the project.

practices within the realm of a neo avant-garde, building on the foundations of dada, Surrealism, Futurism, 1960's 'happenings' and so on.

Within the British context, Arts Council England has funded community-based projects (including murals and street theatre) and the work of artist-led groups since the 1970's including politicised collectives such as the Artist Placement Group (1966-1989), Stephen Willats (b.1943),[95] Hackney Flashers (1974-1980), The Art of Change (Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn, 1991-2002) and Berwick Street Film Collective (1970-1980).

Nicolas Bourriaud's (b.1965) popularization of the term 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud, 1998), which promoted social relations as a form – and the artists most associated with the term in the late 1990's / early 2000's[96] – has undoubtedly had a substantial influence on the practices of artists of my generation, who underwent undergraduate studies in the post-YBA era. Retrospectively, thinking in terms of the relational seemed a necessary corrective to the capitalist excess of the YBA's. On the surface at least it proposed a return to a politic that sought more than individualistic material gain, towards a more communal aesthetic experience, and the production of meaning. Bourriaud's breakthrough also signified what Gregory Sholette describes as 'widespread art world resistance to socially engaged art practices eroding, though always selectively.' (Sholette, 2015, p106.) Sholette is referring to an historical reluctance to qualify much of what was regarded as community art, for example, as worthy of critical reflection *as* art.

Moving on from Bourriaud, I want to focus on a few key thinkers here, who share points of departure that are particularly useful in terms of *ABIFR* and its activities – Grant Kester, Miwon Kwon, Larne Abse Gogarty and artists Pablo Helguera and Andrea Fraser.

Each uses distinct terminology for this form of work – for Fraser it is 'project based' (Fraser, 1994), Kwon uses 'collective artistic praxis' (Kwon, 1997) wherein groups are formed

95 Arguably, public funding of art projects situated within public institutions (which we could potentially conceive of as 'the community' in a country with free museum access) can be traced even further to the state sponsored art supported by the War Artists Advisory Committee of WW2 under the leadership of Sir Kenneth Clark.

96 I'm thinking here of the obvious examples – Rirkrit Tiravanija, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gillian Wearing etc.

provisionally to work out a particular social process (Kwon is also particularly invested in the term 'site specific'). For Helguera, it is 'Socially Engaged Art (SEA)' (Helguera, 2011) and Kester[97] 'dialogical' (Kester, 2005). It is worth noting that the latter two are both influenced by education theory, particularly the work of Habermas and Friere (1970). Kwon, Bishop and Fraser's terminology feels more rooted in framing these practices through the prism of art historical discourse associated with notions of the avant-garde, indeed Bishop states that these practices form 'what avant garde we have today' (Bishop, 2012, p13).

Bishop is referring to artists such as Jeremy Deller, whose pivotal work the *Battle of Orgreave* (2001) re-enacted a social disturbance during the miners' strike between supporters of the National Union of Mine Workers and police officers, which occurred at the Orgreave Coking Plant in Yorkshire on 18 June 1984. (tate.org.uk, 2012.) Many of the reenactors were former miners themselves. This work represented a politically charged collision of English history, class and memory. Whilst the political stakes of such a work foregrounded conversation of the work, Bishop wonders how we might identify or consider it as an aesthetic work. (Bishop, 2012.)

Another important artist to consider, whose work has been referred to as 'participatory' (nytimes.com, 2013) or as 'social practice' (artnews.com, 2014) is Thomas Hirschhorn, whose 'monuments' are placed within economically deprived, usually multi-racial neighbourhoods in major cities. His *Gramsci Monument* (2013) in South Bronx, NYC is typical of this strand of his work. Inspired by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937), the artist worked with local people using quotidian materials to build the physical structure, produced a range of ways to engage including a library, a radio station, local newspaper and a stage for performances and lectures by leading philosophical and art figures. At play within these works are the racial, social and power dynamics formed when a wealthy white artists enters into these communities with European philosophy in tow. Kari Rittenback, amongst others states absent 'any purpose besides offering raw 'experience' to those involved… the artist frames his attention to the 'othered' communities in which his monuments are situated.. as a neutral provocation' noting it is 'hard to imagine

97 Kester also acknowledges a range of terms including littoral, conversation-based etc.

this universalist perspective being granted to an artist with an 'other' ethnic, cultural or gender background, whose motivations might be seen as skewed through the particular lens of identity' (Rittenback, 2014.) Rittenback gets to the heat of my then ambivalence, now antipathy towards dialogical or socially engaged practice. I felt instrumentalised and limited in ways that were not prevalent for white, male artists.

Larne Abse Gogarty (who employs the term 'social practice'), describes the dialogue between Kester and Bishop regarding questions of aesthetics, which unfolded within the pages of *Artforum* in 2006. For Gogarty, Kester's 'more humanist, ethical engagement' which Bishop characterizes as a form of 'woolly liberalism from an anti-humanist perspective.' In this reading Kester in turn accuses Bishop of 'policing the boundary of art' (all Gogarty, 2014). Certainly both have developed their analysis since then, but Gogarty is quite correct, in my opinion, to suggest that 'the debate on aesthetics in social practice has thus been overshadowed by a polarisation between ethics and aesthetics, with the defence of aesthetics… not paying enough attention to particular questions such as form and mediation' (Gogarty, 2014). For Gogarty, the debate has not been specific enough 'but rather shaped by the proliferation of abstracted and generalised terms, categories and criteria' (Gogarty, 2014.)

Nonetheless, in this paper I employ the term 'dialogical' in relation to the Primary project more often than not, taken from Kester's reading of Habermas (Kester, 2005). Although I find Kester's approach has a particular (and rather limiting) bias towards activist-community work (which is not the nature of my practice), the idea that 'the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation – a locus of differing meanings, interpretations and points of view' (Kester, 2013, p10) resonates.

In addition, much of this project was predicated on dialogue, from negotiating the terms of the arrangement with the commissioners (e.g. to commission *ABIFR*, rather than myself) to the final 'outcomes' themselves.' 'Social practice' and 'SEA' are too associated with a particular history and relation to community-based art, and 'project-based' is perhaps not descriptive enough (isn't every artwork a project?). Dialogical feels the most appropriate term for my practice during this period, although admittedly I did not give much through to

this discourse at the time; I was much more invested in making the work than engaging in a dialogue about what to call it. With hindsight, I can see that I was working within the context of the opportunities offered to me at the time, not an active participant in discourse around the form itself. As an emerging artist, particularly as a Black woman, my position felt precarious, and opportunities were few and far between.

Collaboration and dialogical aesthetics

The Primary commission involved a working process that was alternatively dialogical, relational, performative, discursive, live and the result of video editing, location specific and broadcast online, textual and conversational. I will detail the inter-personal and inter-institutional dynamics that arose during this process between myself and the commissioning institution, the collaborators/participants and the various other manifestations of hierarchy and social relations that occurred.

Additionally, I will discuss the particular dynamics of the artist as insider / outside that can arise as a result of negotiating a work situated in an unfamiliar location.

Taking up Kester's utilisation of the term 'dialogical aesthetics' (Kester, 2013), and Kwon and Bishops unease with his theorisation and its reliance on ethics, I will also reflect on the work of artist-curator-writer Pablo Helguera employment of SEA (Socially Engaged Art) (2011). Helguera's approach is also clearly influenced by his background in gallery education (a professional background I share). Whilst I reject the label of SEA for my own practice, Helguera's work is useful in developing an articulation as to why.

Where can the aesthetic be found within dialogical work, and this project in particular? Are art and politics always polarized? Is there a different paradigm? Do we have to accept the basis of this polarization? What does dialogic practice allow for?

This is certainly an area of discord within the field. Bishop suggests that the emphasis on ethics (by theorists such as Kester) where a projects value is determined by its ethical criteria (as opposed to an aesthetic criteria) is a form of retreat in relation to the 'difficulty of describing the artistic value of participatory projects is resolved by resorting to ethical

criteria' (Bishop, 2012, p19.) There is certainly a negative connotation to notions of aesthetics from many writers on dialogical practices, as it is perceived as synonymous with conservative market-driven cultural hierarchy, an idea that has become 'critical orthodoxy' according to Bishop (2012).

Whilst Kester identifies two interrelated areas within which to pursue a definition of dialogical art –speech acts and dialogue, intersubjective ethics and identity formation – he does, however, also produce an account of aesthetics, stating 'dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening…and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the view or collaborator' (2013:108.)

Helguera contests that 'real' dialogue on aesthetics is 'rare,' attributing this to the dominance of French post-Modernism philosophy which characterises dialogue as a 'flawed method of communication, limited by power structures and logocentrism' (Helguera, 2011, p1) Instead, Helguera turns mainly to theories of education in particular, (and also sociology and anthropology) – Gadamer (1975), Habermas (1962), Friere (1970) for the basis of his theorisation.

Helguera states, 'while there is no complete agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful interaction or social engagement what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence' (2011:2). Helguera is not mistaken here, but it is also worth remembering that social intercourse has its own art history, as discussed earlier in this chapter, which potentially provides some guidance for an agreed set of terms, should such a thing be desirable. I recognise that it is not the focus of this thesis.

For Kester whilst 'dialogical art practice, possess their own positive aesthetic content and are more than mere supplements to the authentic work of painting and sculpture' (2013: 90) it's aesthetic is still a form of transformative cognition – it has liberatory possibilities, which appears to be at the core of Bishops disagreement with his approach (Bishop, 2006). Indeed, the insistence on a liberatory outcome ties social practice to social work too closely

to me. It leaves no room for failure, doubt, confusion or ambivalence – all essential components of the experience of art.

In *Delirium and Resistance After the Social Turn*, Gregory Sholette (2015) differentiates social practice from community art on the basis that 'social practice treats the social itself as a medium and material of expression' (2015:216.) In other words the aesthetics *is* the form, which is closer to my thinking during this period of my practice.

Gogarty extends this idea, framing the aesthetic within the multiple forms of mediation between the artist, participants, arts organization, the state as each 'interacts with one another in different ways, meaning the sole category which sustains their mutual (dis) engagement is perhaps the aesthetic' (Gogarty, 2014.) Art, here, is the conduit from which the aesthetic takes place, more a 'coming-to-terms with one's position than an idealised, emancipatory arena' (Gogarty, 2014.) This is closest to what I set out to achieve in Nottingham.

Service, ethics and responsibility – the artist as social worker.

Fraser presciently raises the question of 'service' (Fraser, 1994) in relation to the condition of the artist's labour, authorship of work produced in collaborative and/or community-based projects, and methods of dissemination.

Kwon's take on artists provision of 'services' (Kwon, 1997), like Fraser, appears to be a response to the ways in which dialogical projects reveal what has traditionally been regarded as *invisible* art labour, often as part of the process of the work itself (Fraser's practice is a prime example of work that often performs this role). Service is a useful lens through which to contemplate the relational dynamics referenced above.

I want to return here to the issue of the relationship between the artist, commissioning organisation and funder, and the expectations that arise from non-arts-for-arts-sake funding of artists projects.

Kester describes the history of a Victorian model of funding for the 'improvement' of the poor, 'whose poverty or dispossession is seen as the consequence of individual moral failing rather than any systematic form of oppression' (2013:pxv1) and its contemporary effect on arts funding.

Kester interprets this as an 'orthopedic or corrective' relationship to audience (I would say audience / participant) resonant with assumptions 'about the effects of mass culture and the 'average' viewers ability to understand and critically reflect on the world ..while the artist possesses an exemplary critical awareness, from which the view can gain inspiration and guidance' (2013, pxv1.) That is, the idea that the artist is somehow in a superior position, an educator of those in receipt of their attention. It is worth returning to the question of active v passive listening explore earlier in this chapter – this 'corrective' relationship implies a passive audience. Kwon explores the recoding of institutional conventions to expose 'hidden yet motivated operations – to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art's meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value and to undercut the fallacy of the autonomy' of art and its institutions by making apparent their imbricated relationship to the broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day' (Kwon, 1997, p24.)

Here Kwon and Kester's imperatives find accord. The artist (or art project) invited to work with – or create – a community is often implicated and co-opted into agendas beyond the framework of their projects. More insidiously, I would argue that a legacy of the funding landscape in the UK from the turn of the century onwards (under New Labour and beyond) has led to a set up assumptions about how artists situated within a community should engage with said community – the artist as social worker, or on Kessler's words a 'kind of social service provider. In some cases support is being given to artists' projects by organizations or funders whose primary interest is 'no longer in the arts but in social programs' (Kester, 2013, p139.)[98].

98 Furthermore, a 2016 AHRC publication - Crossick. & Kaszynska's *Understanding the Value of Art & Culture* suggests a return to a more individualized understanding of audience / participate relationship to art as a way forward.

Richard Hylton provides a comprehensive account of the influence of governmental policy on Arts Council England, arguing that Arts Council England was 'complicit in carrying out New Labour's inclusion policy verbatim' (Hylton, 2007 p128), for example, in contrast to offering 'some resistance' (Hylton, 2007, p129) to Thatcherite sensibilities in the 1980s. What I am drawing attention to here, is the ways in which artists have been co-opted into policy imperatives that are not driven by the art itself.

Kwon's take on artists provision of 'services' (Kwon, 2007), like Fraser's 'service' (Fraser, 1994), appears to be a response to the ways in which dialogical projects reveal what has traditionally been regarded as 'invisible' art labour, often as part of the process of the work itself (indeed, Fraser's practice is a prime example of work that often performs this role.)

Andrea Fraser's approach is, unsurprisingly, identifiably artist-centred. She articulates the practical difficulties of negotiating relationships with institutions and organisations, and the constant risk of self-exploitation artists working in what she refers to as 'project-based' work.

As with Kwon, I find that some of Fraser's arguments downplay their own predictability – issues relating to patronage and autonomy that Fraser foregrounds would presumably have arisen during the Renaissance (or Ancient Rome), for example. They do not strike me as being particularly contemporaneous, instead integral to the lives of artists working within any sort of commissioning framework (particularly those without gallery representation.) That is not to suggest that the text does not contact useful critical insight, merely that Fraser perhaps neglects (or downplays) the broader history for dramatic effect (or indeed affect).

Fraser could be read as an artist responding to her own exhaustion, which is in itself an important intervention to make, and extremely relevant in the evaluation of this project – negotiating complex and often conflicting responses to the possibility of self-exploitation (in addition to the exploitation of others) formed a significant part of my subjective experience of the commission.

The next stage of the recruitment process involved Introductory, drop-in sessions organized by Primary at Nottingham Woman's Centre and a local drop-in centre for sex workers, which led me to consider the nature of the expectation Primary – and by proxy their funders – had of my practice as an artist. Sholette's observation that community arts tend to 'substitute artist-generated services for genuine public services, thus reforming, rather than… transforming offensive political inequalities' (Sholette, 2015, p105) is a salient observation here.

'Site' or 'context' are not only concerns during the 'final outcome'[99] of a process-based project; the process itself is also the work. In her introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition *Common Wealth (2003),* Jessica Morgan makes the point that 'what is missing from a theory of relational aesthetics based entirely in the social is an acknowledgement of the role of context, not merely as a source of reference in art, but as a determining force in the meaning of objects' (Morgan, 2003, p25.)

If we apply a generous definition of the term *objec*t to denote Fraser's 'project based' (Fraser, 1994) as the operative form here, Morgan's assertion of the context as a determining force reinforces the idea that – for dialogical practices – context is everything.

Helguera adopts a position close to Kester, in that they both utilize critical theories of education in their analysis, and are both attached to the activist model of the community artist. However, Helguera is clear about the need to distinguish art making from social work as in his analysis SEA has *'*a double function that social work lacks. When we make socially engaged artwork, we are not just offering a service to a community (assuming it is a service-oriented piece); we are proposing our action as a symbolic statement in the context of our cultural history (and/or art history) and entering into a larger artistic debate' (2011:36.)

Fraser makes the point that questions of service are not unique to project-based practice, but the conditions of such practices necessitate foregrounding them. For Fraser, we are all

99 Funders are notoriously preoccupied with 'outcomes' and legacies, creating difficulties for organizations and individuals who wish to support process-based or research-based work

‘always already serving. Studio practice conceals this condition by separating production from the interests it meets and the demands it responds to at its point of material symbolic consumption. As a service can be defined, in economic terms, as a value which is consumed at the same time as it is produced, the service element of project-based practice eliminates such separation.’ (1994:72)

I would argue that, in the post New Labour landscape, where the State is in retreat from aspects of social life that were previously sacrosanct essential services, artists working with ‘communities’ have to find ways to negotiate the kind of *services* (Kwon, 2007) they are expected to be able to provide. Sholette identifies this as a result of the ‘collapse of the world financial market (leading to this) replacement strategy of artist service providers for actual social services’ (2015:105) as a result of public service cuts. Sholette remind us that artists work cheap.

Institutional Frameworks

The question of service and boundaries highlights an inherent tension that I was working to resolve with my practice – what happens when my practice and my then employment (as Curator, Public Programmes at Tate Modern / Tate Britain) felt apprehensively intertwined?

Kwon writes about the way in which as artists have ‘adopted managerial functions of art institutions (curatorial, educational, archival) as an integral part of their creative process, managers of art within institutions (curators, educators, public program directors), who often take their cues from these artists, now function as authorial figures in their own right’ (1997:44.)

I found myself at the centre of this paradigm.

I found Bishop’s assertion that, ‘programming events, seminars and discussions (and the alternative institutions that might result from these) can all be regarded as artistic outcomes in exactly the same way as the production of discrete objects, performances and projects’ (2012:245) reassuring at the time, even if though had not quite managed to convince myself that it was entirely true in my experience.

The particularities of working for a high-profile arts institution in a role that was increasingly adapting to merge with the form my practice takes (partly due to the institutional imperatives Kwon describes, partly from my own initiative) had implications for how I conceived of my practice more broadly. I wrote the first draft of this chapter in February 2016, whilst concurrently developing weeklong discursive and performative projects with three of the artists / theorists I discuss within this thesis as part of my job. I began to ask myself, can this also be seen as part of my art practice? Ultimately, the idea of my job becoming part of my practice was deeply unsettling to me. I felt as if I was one step closer to becoming someone for whom an independent art practice is a thing of the past. This represented everything I have been working to avoid since graduating from art school.

Fraser challenged me. She states that 'the divisions of labor within the field between production, distribution, and reception are effectively divisions of interest. …necessary to create the appearance of disinterest essential to the production of belief in the judgment of artistic value.' (1997:74) I wondered at the time, is this part of my anxiety?

Authorship and Collaboration

My collaborators in *ABIFR* Nottingham were very keen to utilise their various technical abilities to create some kind of public workshop, and we developed the idea of a public event consisting of one day of workshops (led by them) and another day of conversation (which I would focus on developing). Both generated out of a desire to respond to the same questions –

- How are ideas of Utopia / Dystopia constructed? Where do these concepts come from, and how do they affect the development of human cultures?
- What kind of human relationships – with ourselves, our families and the wider community / country / world – can we imagine?

The group divided themselves into two working groups – one practical, one writing-based – and developed public workshops for adults in response to the questions.

The workshops utilised a shared science fiction narrative to construct alternative visions of the future, through object making and storytelling. The group asked me to write the narratives, which were the starting point for our public activities.

The master narrative is as follows:

Some point in the future.

Humanity has left the Earth, headed towards an unknown destination, on a series of Spaceships. Communication between ships is periodic. Families are scattered amongst the ships – no one knows whether they will ever see their loved ones again. The main form of communication is via capsules, sent from ship to ship. Some capsules may never reach their intended destination.

Additional prompts were devised for each practical workshop. These narrative prompts formed part of the publicity for the workshops – potential participants were therefore exposed to them before booking a workshop.

The question of authorship has an ethical dimension for me. I would not claim ownership of anything my collaborators produced as part of the project. Nor was it important that I be recognized as the 'author' of the narratives. Equally, one of the collaborators ran the *ABIFR* twitter feed throughout the duration of the project, but did so anonymously.

Although my presence was very much announced during the second part of the public outcome, it was important not to deflect from the work my collaborators had undertaken, and the ownership they had taken of the project. I was also acutely aware that I was the only one being paid – the idea of the collaborators taking such an active role in the project has arisen during the process itself. There was no extra budget. Each woman had her own reason for being part of the project; nonetheless I am reminded of the way in which the artist's labour is privileged within these projects (even when it is undervalued monetarily.)

According to Kwon, 'authorship and authenticity remain in site-specific art as a function of the artist's 'presence' at the point of (re) production' (1997:72). Although in this instance she is referring to the reproduction of ephemeral work for exhibition, some decades later it is certainly a truism that my presence as the instigator, originator and participant in *Into the Future!* is a proxy for authorship in the realm of the art world.

***Into the Future!* Practical Workshop introduction:**

You receive a capsule from another ship, sent through Space. The capsule includes several objects of unknown origin. Something is broken. It is essential that you fix it and send the capsule on to the next ship. There is no manual.

The practical workshop, held at Nottingham Hackspace, provided the opportunity to utilize various tools – laser cutter, food dehydrator, circuit-building equipment – and participants created objects for a mysterious space shuttle their ship had received.

Outputs of this workshop took various forms, including preserved (mainly Caribbean) food, a chemical process by which liquid water became spherical, a miniature working Mars Rover type vehicle, various other mechanical devices and the capsule itself. Most participants also took part in the writing workshop.

Fig. 30 ABIFR (2015) Images from Practical Workshop, *Into the Future!* [Digital photograph]. (Credit ABIFR Nottingham.)

Writing Workshop introduction:

You receive a capsule from another ship, sent through Space. The capsule contains unidentified objects that have been worked on by other members of the Ship's crew. What are they? What do they do? Do they pose a threat – or an opportunity – to the survival of the species?

Fig. 31 ABIFR (2015) Images from *Writing Workshop, Into the Future!* Digital photograph]. (Credit ABIFR Nottingham.)

The writing workshop – using design fiction tools, and inspired by the anthology of activists writing fiction inspired by Octavia Butler *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice* Movements (brown, Imarisha, 2015*),* responded to the objects produced during the practical workshop.

By framing their workshop around *Octavia's Brood,* the group placed a speculative fiction led social justice work inspired by Octavia Butler as the core text for this exercise. They also contacted the anthology's editors to alert them to their use of the text for this purpose, and to share ideas for the workshop.

Design fiction has a rather mutable definition. My own understanding of it involves using technology and 'fictions' (text, drama, comics), usually in narrative form, to develop, envision, explain, raise ethical questions and generally test ideas for and of possible futures for society, often via design solutions.

The *Design Fiction Research Group* at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), describes its work as, exploring *'*how to spark imagination and discussion about the social, cultural, and ethical implications of new technologies through design and storytelling' (MIT Media Lab, 2019.)

Joshua Glen Tanenbaum, Assistant Professor in Informatics at UC Irvine, describes the methodology as using 'narrative elements to envision and explain possible futures for design' (Tanenbauum,2016.) Tanenbaum also emphasizes the utilization of the term 'fiction' to denote storytelling, as opposed to something that is made up. Fiction does not have to mean *non-fact* in this sense. The connection to storytelling is expanded by science fiction writer Bruce Sterling. For Sterling, design fiction is 'the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change that produces potential objects and services' (1996:94). Sterling emphasises the issue of time within speculation, as futuristic media have 'a fantastically short shelf life. It means the futuristic is becoming hopelessly archaic at an unnatural speed' (1996:93).

Paradoxically, Sterling also recognises – and this is where *ABIFR*'s premise comes to mind - the need for 'better ways' to discuss these potential objects and services as ideas can move from 'potentiality to actuality with remarkable speed.' (both Sterling, 2016, p94). *ABIFR* aims to shift perspectives on who makes the future – that is, in whose image and subjectivity the future is made – with alacrity.

There is a tension between the desire to shift paradigms more broadly and the reality of *how* this might be done (which is a tension at the heart of the think tank as a form). Designer Anthony Dunne – a pioneer of design fiction – acknowledges that whilst it is difficult to influence government you can 'impact people's attitudes' (Dunne, 2016, p58.) For Dunne, working with industry and being in dialogue with researchers developing technologies is paramount as 'it's a two-pronged approach – the general and the specific' (2016:58). His work with partner Fiona Raby, in his words, 'contributes to a general broadening out of what we think of as possible, that alternative perspectives on everyday life are valuable in themselves' (2016:58.)

Design fiction is increasingly used in the communicative science and technology fields (e.g. informatics, futurology), as well as in spatial and urban design. I was introduced to this form of practice by colleagues from the Horizon Research Centre; it has impacted my approach to working within workshop settings (Including the Seven Generations workshop described in the *Octavia Butler* chapter), as well as the way my practice approaches the question of storytelling.[100.]

***Into the Future!* – The Conversation**

In contrast to Day One, I programmed Day Two. Or, at least, myself working as *ABIFR*. The idea was to create the framework for a day of dynamic, active conversation that could be experienced on multiple registers – as part of the collective in the room, as part of a live broadcast via the Internet, and in the form of an edited account of the day.

The creation of dialogical platforms as vehicle for intersubjective exchange is an integral part of my practice. The relationship between the durational and the dialogical, intentionality and invitation is therefore of great interest to me. For Bishop, 'artists devising social situations as a dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life' (2012:13), is central to her framing of this form of practice.

Jessica Morgan is more cautious, stating that 'the mere involvement of the actions of audience members is not enough to assume a vital or direct relationship to the work of art. Nor is the artistic framing of this experience, whether within the institution or in the public or private realm, necessarily enough to differentiate it from the reification of existence' (2003:24.) Careful framing of the exchange is essential for Morgan, in order for the interaction to bring about 'awareness not only of the pleasure or discomfort of social interchange but a consciousness of the workings of a larger political, economic or psychological framework as evidenced in these relations' (2003:24). My interpretation of

100 Design fiction techniques have also been used within schools, for example the New Future School project in North West England, that aimed to 'translate and explore the potential of participatory design fiction practices for use with young people and those that work with them to explore near future scenarios of education that open up alternative and plural futures' (Duggan, Lindley, McNicol 2017.)

Morgan's formulation is that *how* the dialogical space is framed, and whether it is imbued with a reflexive consciousness of its own mechanics, is vital.

I don't share Morgan's horror of the potential 'reification of existence' after all, it is not only our conception of what constitutes art that continues to shift, but what value we place on the everyday ingredients of life within neo-capitalism. However, I take on board the attention she draws to what I read as a need for situational transparency.

Bishop's call to a model of participation which forecloses 'the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audience, one in which everyone is a producer' (2012:241) is closer to the aim of *Into The Future!'s* open dialogical space. However, Gogarty's warning about the fetishization of 'usefulness as a prized characteristic' (Gogarty, 2017) is highly relevant. I struggled with the need to not become – or feel like – a social worker, an especially useful person here to service this community, throughout the project.

Also instructive was Pablo Helguera's proposition for the creation of 'a platform or a network for the participation of others, so that the effects of the project may outlast its ephemeral presentation' (2011:12.) Helguera's modest conception intersects with the utility of design fiction discussed earlier, precipitating a form of exchange that is potentially generative.

Participation, after all, has its limits. In an essay for *Art Monthly*, Dave Beech proposes that 'participation cannot deliver what participation promises. In both art and politics, participation is an image of a much longed for social reconciliation but it is not a mechanism for bringing about the required transformation' (Beech, 2008.) Beech makes a similar distinction between collaboration and participation as I do, arguing that 'the shortfall between participation and collaboration… leads to perennial questions about the degree of choice, control and agency of the participant' (Beech, 2008.) By relinquishing control of much of the public experience of the project (although recognising the aspects that the group requested I lead on) I aimed to create the possibility for a more generative dynamic that expended beyond my singular voice and vision.

The conversation which formed the second day of the event (framed as a seminar; in retrospect not the most feminist choice of words) was proceed by two framing questions:

Who makes The Future?

Is imagining The Future a political act?

Fig. 32 ABIFR (2015) *Into the Future! Day Two - Morning session* [Digital photograph]. (Credit ABIFR Nottingham.)

The event situated the dialogue within the frame of how our ideas of the future are culturally constructed and asks what new forms collective imaginings of the future might take. By 'cultural construction' I am referring to the idea that the future is determined by – and led by – white, male heroic figures, (or the occasional plucky white woman) reinforcing the notion there are no/few Black or Global Majority people working in the sciences or creating the future.[101]

Participants were given special *Into the Future!* badges with the *ABIFR* logo, continuing my

101 Websites such as *Women at NASA*, the *100 Year Starship* project, not to mention the documented history of Black / Global Majority astronauts, Space scientists etc. attest to how real-life offers an alternate view. However, my point is that this is not the version of future-construction that is sold to the public via reproductive media.

commitment to developing an aesthetic register for the project. The first half of the day asked, how are notions of Utopia and Dystopia related and why do they form the basis of the way the Future is constructed in popular culture?

This session featured presentations from academic David Bell on Utopia as a political concept, student Ibtisam Ahmed on Section 377 (a colonial-era law banning homosexuality in India) and prescriptive utopias and artist Kai Kreutler introducing the UnMonastery project, which uses the model of the monastery to create communities in politically unstable parts of Europe.

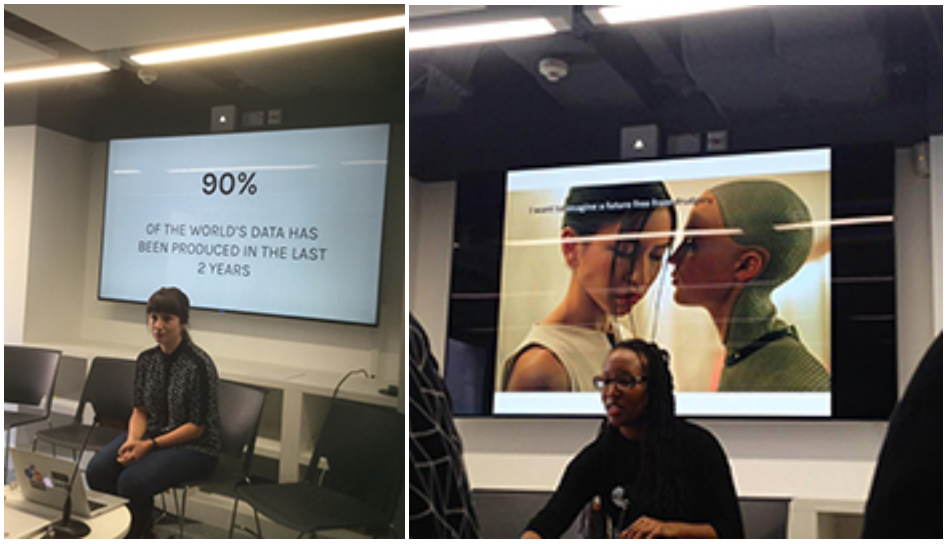

Fig. 33 ABIFR (2015) *Into the Future! Day Two - Afternoon session.* [Digital photograph]. (Credit ABIFR Nottingham.)

The afternoon session asked, what kind of speculative relationships can we envisage for the future – with ourselves, our families and society as a whole?

For this session, I created a speculative proposal for robots as caregivers. I aimed to connect human non-human relations in sf media, in particular a recent glut of Black aliens (in various short-lived SF TV shows) and the mechanization of Black female bodies in art history. I used this as a way of thinking through some of the art historical elements of I was thinking about

at the time, and my (then) interest in writing about Black aliens as part of this thesis.[102]

Technologist Sarah Gold's presentation focused on ethics and accountability in new technologies, particularly the rapidly accelerated march towards embedding communicative technologies in everyday objects that most of us are unaware of.

Tammy Nicols, of Games Workshop, talked about the ways in which Open World Gaming was changing interpersonal behaviours and ideas of intimacy in the gaming community (and thus in society more widely.)

After an understandably slow start, I would argue that the event did succeed in generating a conversation amongst a group of people who had chosen to spend the day together, as opposed to an 'audience' passively receiving information from 'experts.' The conversation opened up considerable space for the rest of the non-presenting participants to feel able to enter into the dialogue in a non-positivist way. This is an example of performative pedagogy and active listening, as discussed earlier in this paper. This daylong conversation has been edited into a 58 second promotional infomercial.

What is the visual?

One of the most exciting aspects of Claire Bishops book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2013) is her defence of the visual in participatory practices. Bishop explains how participatory work is mainly critically discussed in terms of a projects – or artists – ethics, as opposed to how the experience of such projects is rendered visually.

Bishop states that to 'grasp participatory art from images alone is almost impossible: casual photographs of people talking, eating, attending a workshop or screening or seminar tell us very little, almost nothing, about the concept and context of a given project. They rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and convey nothing of the affirmative dynamic that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them' (2013:5.)

102 As my thesis and practice developed, I turned my attention away from Black aliens in particular, and began to work with the trilogy of influences behind *Hailing Frequencies Open*.

However, I would argue that documentation of participatory projects (which is essentially what Bishop is calling out) carry their own aesthetic qualities, and their own indexical histories. Images of 1950's beatnik readings, 1960's 'Happenings', 1970's feminist body-based performances etc. contain their own aesthetic charge and have great art historical value. Images that might be regarded as documentation have also found a place within the market, providing an avenue for artists to monetize non-tangible practices.

Bishop suggests that the emphasis on process renders the art dependent on first-hand experience (the memory of which is correspondingly unreliable.) However, I believe that, as the market has (tentatively at first) embraced certain artists working discursively or performatively, this has affected the way such work is produced. For example, an artist can create the performance or discursive platform, (documenting the process), produce props or costume (which are saleable, or displayable objects), photograph the performance (producing images suitable for exhibition) and edit the video footage produced (creating limited edition or open access video which may – or may not – be more than mere documentation.) As ever, artists have to be ahead of the game. Perhaps what is missing from Bishop's account is the impact of the dynamic practices of artists working in the field of performance on dialogical practices.

In relation to this, Helguera suggests, 'performance is embedded in SEA, not only because SEA is performative but because it borrows from several conceptual mechanisms and strategies that are derived from the history of performance art… SEA confronts many of the issues that also belong to performance art, including the role of documentation (and) the relationship to spectacle and to entertainment' (2011:68.)

With regards to *Into The Future!* it is worth noting that I did not produce any of the documentation. All images were produced by other members of *ABIFR*, or by the commissioning institution, Primary. The video was live streamed and filmed by *This is Tomorrow*, the online contemporary art magazine. This was for two reasons, firstly in order to be fully present within the work, but also because I believe it is important that the account of the project is not only authored by myself. I agree with Helguera that 'if we

accept that SEA is a type of communicative action – the result of an intersubjective dynamic – it is incongruous that its documentation be only the one-sided account of the artist' (2013:75.)

In addition, the work was always designed to have an afterlife – to take on the form of infomercials or other modes of propaganda; I can edit the video to my specifications. The documentation stage of the project was designed to be as open ended as the rest of the process.

Summary

Whilst *ABIFR* could be described as a post-medium practice (taking from the work of Rosalind Krauss) my work had not previously always been participatory in the manner of this commission. Past projects including *The Paul Robeson Research Station* (Site Gallery, 2011) or *May Day (We Ask for Nothing)* (2012) more obviously utilised performance as a tool, although they also took place within the public realm. However, the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* developed a sense of its own visual register in order to operate as think-tank, including the use of branding and the production of a short promotion video encapsulating the final event. Visual images are part of its propagandizing potentiality.

I produced logos for the project and badges for all the participants, and holding slides featuring the logo for the live broadcast of *Into the Future!,* in addition to the images created during the photoshoot mentioned earlier in this text.

These promotional images were distributed via the Primary website, my personal website and the *ABIFR* website itself. In addition, the photograph of the *ABIFR* Nottingham women was used to illustrate my interview with Left Lion, a Nottingham area listings magazine. Unexpectedly, one of the speakers also incorporated this photograph into his presentation during the *Into the Future!* As propaganda, the image therefore fulfilled its purpose – it circulated in ways I did not control.

Into the Future! utilized inter-subjective exchange, and public dialogue as a medium, dematerializing a year of work into a social / dialogic process condensed into two days of

public activity. Conviviality and criticality intertwined (lunch was provided, and post-event drinks). However, beyond the temporary nature of the dialogical platform itself, the work has rematerialized into moving and still image form, utilising the project to promote the think tank's knowledge generating capabilities.

interview: **Wayne Burrows**
photo: **Ben Harriott**

THE FUTURE IS COMING ON

The future isn't all robot butlers, meal pills and Barbarella-style jumpsuits – ...And Beyond Institute for Future Research's 'space programme' project aims to inspire women to think about ideas, issues and dreams that relate to their lives by imagining the future. We caught ABIFR leader, **Sonya Dyer**, in the very much present day, ahead of their workshop at Primary…

Can you tell us a bit about the way ...And Beyond Institute For Future Research (ABIFR) has developed during your time at Primary?
The version of the ABIFR in Nottingham is made up of a really interesting group of women, ranging from students and mums to working women, none of whom knew each other before this project started. When I began the institute existed in my imagination. I hoped that by imagining it, it could seem to exist in the imaginations of other people. The project at Primary has been about the collective journey we've undertaken, where everyone involved has a platform to really utilise her own skills and interests, and to frame the project in her own way. What I really don't like, and didn't want to end up doing here, was to get other people to do my work for me. This is about all of us working together.

I gather your own interest in the future goes back to your childhood?
I was really interested in people like Nichelle Nichols, who played Uhura in *Star Trek*, and Mae Jemison, who was the first black female astronaut. I was also fascinated by the space shuttle Challenger in 1986 because a woman schoolteacher was going to go into space. My mum told me when the launch was happening so I could watch it live on TV – and then of course there was the explosion, and I didn't know what was happening because it was like watching a film. I felt devastated afterwards because I'd invested so much in this one schoolteacher who was going into space. Later, this was all tied up with science fiction, especially the work of people like Octavia Butler and Ursula K Le Guin – writers who had interesting takes on how we might imagine new ways of being and living together in the future.

What was it that gripped your imagination about these kinds of narratives as a child growing up in London?
If I were to analyse it, I think it was the potential for adventure, the sense of outer space as a location outside our current reality, where the possibility of creating other kinds of stories and narratives was open. What science fiction gives you, as a nerdy kid growing up, is a space where you're enjoying worlds you can transport yourself to, and they give you the keys to create similar worlds of your own. I mean, I also liked things like Enid Blyton, which were just as remote from where I was living as outer space. But in the longer term it was the visual culture built around these ideas about the future that held my interest. When you watched *Star Trek* or *Dr Who* the ways the future would be visualised were always fascinating and I could imagine a space for myself inside those visions. That was probably the most important thing.

I recall seeing some links you posted to trailers for recent African-made science fiction films. Is this something that's part of your research?
Yes, in parallel with things like Afro-futurism, which has a very long history and is obviously a very big influence on my own project. That runs from people like Sun Ra to a current musicians like Janelle Monáe, who uses a lot of Afro-futuristic imagery in her work – drawing from things like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and *Star Trek*, as well as more directly from more recent Afro-futurist material. So all that is in my project's pot too. I'm mainly interested in reimagining the forms that female intellectual labour might take in the future, so ABIFR is about drawing on all these threads to imagine, as ambitiously as possible, what possibilities might be open to us.

> What science fiction gives you, as a nerdy kid growing up, is a space where you're enjoying worlds you can transport yourself to, and they give you the keys to create similar worlds of your own.

One focus of your work seems to be the meshing of gender and race in the ways we think about the future...
I did an event in June with two other artists, Sutapa Biswas and Ope Lori, looking at this question as part of the public programme around the Glenn Ligon exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary. We specifically discussed intersectional feminism there, but I think my work is about creating connections between seemingly disparate parts of many different things. In a film like *Interstellar*, the demographics of the United States say that white Americans are on course to become a minority, with mixed-race, Hispanic, Indigenous, African- and Asian-Americans already a majority of children under five and set to become the majority of Americans over the next fifty years. But the future of the United States is presented as if you could be in a dust bowl state with no Mexicans.

How do these themes relate to the idea of the practicalities of the space programme you described at the press conference when you launched the project?
There is a space programme that provides a framework for many things in the project, but obviously that's a metaphor, so it's not really about that in a literal sense. The workshops will be framed by a scenario about a future civilisation travelling in space, but the questions we're using that scenario to ask are more broadly applied – basically, what kinds of future can we possibly imagine for ourselves? How ambitiously do we want to think about the possibilities?

It's always obvious in hindsight that our visions of the future end up looking like the time they were made in – so *Metropolis* looks like the twenties, *Star Trek* looks like the sixties, *The Matrix* looks like the nineties...
These films and stories always reflect contemporary anxieties. I love films like *Back to the Future*, and would love to own a hoverboard, but of course that film is not really about the future at all. It's about that moment in the eighties when the fantasy of returning to a fictional fifties small-town America was gaining political traction. As a species, we always find it difficult to see beyond our own noses and anxieties to the possibilities that might exist beyond us. But there are always little nuggets and glimpses, so if you think about how we use mobile phones now, it's totally *Star Trek*. But in the sixties it would have seemed absurd that these phones might really exist and be so taken for granted by all of us. So in that one small way we are living out a little bit of that *Star Trek* vision of the future.

Into the Future: Workshops and Seminar, Broadway and Nottingham Hackspace, Friday 11 – Saturday 12 September, £5 - £15.

sonyadyerprojects.wordpress.com

Fig. 34 ABIFR (2015) *Left Lion* interview [PDF file]. Image courtesy of Left Lion magazine.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE THINK TANK

Think tanks affect our political and social realities in ways both tangible and intangible. They shape our lives by setting the trajectory of acceptable political thought, and other aspects of public life, including determining priorities for scientific and medical research and informing public policy through advocacy and the dissemination of ideas. They are arguably the main way those of us living in advanced economies are (often unsuspectingly) exposed to 'new' ideas (which may in fact be recycled old ideas) and are arguably, according to academic Darota Dakowska 'increasingly visible organisational structures which involve strategies of positioning and legitimization' (2015:363.)

Here, I do not mean to suggest that we have all consciously consulted a think tank. Rather, I want to invite consideration of the ways in which the work of think tanks often determine priorities for public funding, which includes the support of arts and culture**. C**onsider also the increasing number of research-based entities within the university system funded by wealthy individuals or groups, which either explicitly, or otherwise operate in the manner of, think tanks, generating and disseminating ideas with the intention of influencing public life.

As an example, the University of Oxford careers service website emphasizes how 'exciting, influential and fulfilling working at a think tank can be. It posits think tanks as research institutes that seek to play a key role in making and influencing global, regional and national policy and goes on to claim think tank researchers influence public opinion and public policy' (University of Oxford, 2019.) Think tanks based at Oxford include the *Future of Humanity Institute* (supported by funders as diverse as Elon Musk and the Leverhulme Trust), a multidisciplinary institute that utilizes the 'tools of mathematics, social sciences and philosophy (to ask) big-picture questions about humanity and its prospects' (FHI, 2019.)

It is worth noting that the definition of a think tank is quite broad, and can encompass a wide range of institutions, which is part of their appeal to me as a framework for art

practice. Think tanks can take the forms including 'research institutes, foundations, research laboratories attached to academic institutions and analysis centres' (Dakowska, 2015, p363.)

In this brief chapter, I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the contentious history of the think tank. Instead, I will critically examine some of the ways in which the form is being used by contemporary artists, as a way of further contextualising the …*And Beyond Institute for Future Research.*

However, before I embark on this analysis, it is useful to begin with some understanding of what a think tank is, or - more importantly - what a think tank *does*: how it performs its function. So, what is a think tank? Notable examples from the political sphere include the *Fabian Society* (broadly, democratic socialist), *Demos* (cross party), the *Adam Smith Institute* (neoliberal, formerly libertarian) and *Chatham House* (non-governmental, international). The etymology of the phrase derives from a colloquial term for the brain first used in the early 1900's (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2019).

According to standard dictionary definitions, a think tank is variously defined as: 'an institute, corporation, or group organized to study a particular subject (such as a policy issue or a scientific problem) and provide information, ideas, and advice' (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2019); or, alternatively, as 'a research institute or organization employed to solve complex problems or predict or plan future developments, as in military, political, or social areas' (Dictionary.com, 2019.) This distinction between studying and solving, prediction and providing information is, I would suggest, often a generative and constructive one within contemporary arts practice using the think tank model.

In his book, *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategy Guide to Policy Impact (2013),* Andrew Selee describes the work of think tanks as, 'getting new ideas into the public sphere' or 'shaping the way that policymakers and the public understand issues: a process which necessitates planning, research and a respected institutional or personal reputation' (both 2013:5.) Selee's four critical resources for success are, 'human resources, financial resources, partnerships and reputation (brand)' (2013:15.) In other words, Selee believes that the success of a think tank's performance depends on being able to hire the right

people, having access to people to give you money, making friends with the most useful people, and being a voice that is listened to. Selee goes on to state that, 'successful think tanks develop systematic approaches to planning for impact… so that they make the greatest possible difference on public ideas and policy decisions' (2013:4.)

However, Norin Arshed suggests that think tanks have 'no systematic method of knowing where ideas come from, and how they directly influence government officials with them' (2016:80.) Where Arshed's research does concur with Selee is in determining that 'whatever power think tanks have depends on how much support they have from certain political parties and how much institutional access they have' (2016:81.) These descriptions conjure up images of bright young things dashing about the corridors of *The West Wing* (NBC Television, 1999 – 2006), or the shiny, smiling faces of New Labour (whose rise was charted in partnership with the *Institute for Public Policy Research*, or IPPR, a centrist think tank). It may also bring to mind the USA-influenced free market advocate think tanks that aided Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in 1979, a time when the model's ascendency was becoming apparent. I am thinking here of the *Centre for Policy Studies (CPS),* the *Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA)*, or, perhaps most famously of all, the *Adam Smith Institute* – all founded in the United Kingdom in the period from 1974 - 1977.

Andrew Rich notes the proliferation; the number of think tanks 'quadrupled from fewer than 70 to more than 300 between 1970 and the turn of the century' (2004:4) in the USA, and the Thatcher revolution was an influential part of this conservative wave. Equally, it is arguable that these conservative think tanks worked, if not in concert, then at least in sympathy, with each other across the Atlantic – national borders being no barrier to ideas. Whilst the UK cannot claim the same number of think tanks as the United States, I'm not convinced that we cannot claim a similar degree of impact. That is to say, from academia to policy research, cultural advocacy, and political agitation, a plethora of think tanks, from the Thatcher era onwards, influence our everyday lives now as never before.

Dakowska suggests that some think tanks 'owe their visibility to the notoriety and political and social capital of their founders' (2015:364.) I explored going down this route in my practice – developing a performative persona as a means of gaining attention to/for *ABIFR* –

at an early stage, including the potential for flash mob[103] and outrageous public gestures. Ultimately, it felt too contrived and irrelevant – I was not interested in creating work that felt superficial.

The SuperPAC

An example of a generative and subversive use of the intellectual legitimacy conferred upon the think tank-type structure, is that of Stephen Colbert, the comedian, writer and talk show host from the USA. Although he may seem an outlier within the context of a visual art PhD thesis, I believe Colbert weaponized the space between performance, political strategy and spectacle in a way that is instructive.

The SuperPAC or Political Action Committee (PAC) is the think tank's more materially influential cousin. A PAC is an organisational structure that pools campaign contributions from members and donates to campaigns in support (or indeed, in protest) of individual candidates, legislation or ballots. PACs can raise unlimited amounts of money (as opposed to limitations placed on contributions from individuals to individuals). The potential for exploiting PAC funding for individual gain was highlighted by the founding of *Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow* by Colbert in March 2011. This PAC was formed in response to the 2008 *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* Supreme Court decision, which confirmed free speech rights for corporations, allowing them the right to spend unlimited amounts of money in political advertising.

Under the guise of Dr Stephen T. Colbert, his conservative pundit alter ego, it was explicitly stated that money would be used for campaign expenses including luxury hotel rooms, private jet travel and shopping trips (all ways in which mega donors have allegedly used the PAC system to court politicians). Colbert served as the sole board member of the PAC and also purchased ad campaigns and ran for the (non-existent) role of 'President of the United States of South Carolina' in 2012. Colbert's aims were to expose the lack of transparency in

103 Defined by Oxford Dictionary as a 'large public gathering at which people perform an unusual or seemingly random act and then disperse, typically organized by means of the Internet or social media' (Lexico.com, 2019.)

the PAC system, and campaign finance more generally, and to galvanise civic engagement in the political system. Through weaponizing his performance skills and the platform it has afforded him, Colbert exposed not only the absurdity of the system and the corruption inherent within political finance, but also how easy it is for vested interests to influence the political options distributed in the public sphere. [104]

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow raised $1.2m from public donations. According to reports, after operating expenditures and independent expenditures (such as TV ads) this amount was divided between the charities Habitat for Humanity, Donors Choose, Yellow Ribbon Fund, Team Rubicon, Center for Responsive Politics and Campaign Legal Center. Funds were also distributed to the Ham Rove Memorial Fund of the Coastal Community Foundation (Yeager, 2015), presumably named the canned ham with glasses that Colbert used as a substitute for Republican political strategist Carl Rove on his show in 2012[105]. Colbert received a Peabody Award for his work in 2012, in recognition of the innovative means he had utilised to inform the American public of the impact of the Supreme Court decision.

Stephen Colbert is a different order of performer than the kinds of visual and performance artists under discussion in this thesis. Nonetheless, through this project, Colbert utilised the 'four elements' identified by Selee, and weaponized his skillset, access, influence and platform to enact the radical potentiality of the think tank-type structure with singular ambition, commitment and, ultimately, social impact.

The think tank in contemporary art practice – local, national and international

The think tank-type model reoccurs in different forms of performative, collaborative and so-called 'socially engaged' (Helguera, 2011) practices. In this section, I will briefly address some examples of think tanks created within the context of contemporary art –

104 The original website for the Colbert PAC – www.ColbertPAC.com – now directs readers to the Comedy Central website. The Sunlight Foundation provides what it reports as a detailed breakdown of the PAC's finances.

105 Ham Rove became a running joke on Colbert's television show, until he was unceremoniously 'killed' on air.

foregrounding a series of projects, which have been particularly influential on my own thinking. They represent distinct variations of the model, and highlight ways artists have used institutions of research as tools for the performance of institutional legitimacy. Each project represents a different relation to capitalism, subject-object, neo-colonial / gentrification agendas, community building and notions of the local, national and international. Each lends itself to a different form of performativity, and constructs different publics for their works; many intersect between various categories.

I am interested in the performativity of the institution. What does a think tank allow these projects to do, that other forms of organisation cannot? How do artists utilise this institutional form to create works that at least attempt to be both inside and outside overarching superstructures (larger institutions, colonial legacies)? And what happens to the think tank, itself, when it claims the role of art? In other words, can art transform the potentiality of the think tank?

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA)

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA), a research project set up by Dutch artist, Renzo Martens and developed at the KASK – School of Arts in Ghent, in 2014, initially sought to, in his own words, create a 'central African gentrification programme' (Jeffries, 2014)[106] in Lusanga, a town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (near a former Unilever palm oil plantation), via art capital.

The word gentrification has troubling implications, particularly in a formerly colonised region of the world with an extreme inequality of wealth distribution. Indeed, one of the major critiques of gentrification, particularly the Floridian[107] model so influential on UK arts

106Whilst the term 'gentrify' no longer appears on the IHA website, it is still referenced elsewhere, including in newspaper articles from the period. I have cited references to this effect.

107I am referring to the work of American urban studies theorist Richard Florida, whose book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) had a significant effect on New Labour cultural and economic policy in relation to the 'creative industries.' In brief, Florida asserts that high concentrations of artists, tech workers and LGBT people, amongst other 'high Bohemian's' raises an area's economic profile. Florida's work is generally regarded as being integral to legitimizing gentrification policies, which have been critiqued as social cleansing and ethnic cleansing. One of the ironies of such policies is that gentrification inevitably eventually displaces artists, as property and rental prices rise. Most significant is the impact on the original working-class communities with deep ties to the area.

policy in the early part of the 21st century, was that the surplus value created by the 'creative class' was not in fact shared with the locals, but used to displace them. This raised the question of what possible motives could there be for a white, European artist to initiate a project espousing gentrification in Africa?

The copy on the website has significantly altered in tone since I first accessed it in 2015, and gentrification is no longer mentioned as its aim. Instead, it now describes itself as a research project. Accordingly, IHA's goal is now to 'prove that artistic critique on economic inequality can redress it – not symbolically, but in material terms…. (IHA) facilitates the global dissemination of the artworks created with the CATPC, the profits of which return directly Congo to support the makers and their families, as well as community projects in Lusanga' (IHA, 2017.)

This framing now positions the IHA's role as providing 'artistic critique', and also indicates the local community as the main beneficiaries of the economic outcomes of the project. The model is thus: locally based artists produce works, most commonly using materials derived from cacao farming. These works are then exhibited and sold in significant Western art institutions, with the profit derived from these sales going back to the artists. It is unclear precisely what percentage of sales returns to the artists. Of course there is also cultural capital, which I would argue largely, or even entirely resides with Martens, himself – his name is recognised, and 'allows' the Congolese artists access to these spaces[108].

At time of writing, the IHA website uses terms such as 'global economic segregation' and 'local free zone,' describing the Congolese plantation workers' 'artistic engagement with plantation labour' (IHA, 2017). This revised language marks a significant shift in the self-description of IHA's aims and partnerships from its inception, which is to be cautiously welcomed, as it suggests a less colonial relationship between the Dutch artists' symbolic, cultural and economic value and those of the Congolese people involved.

108 It should also be noted that IHA is now also in partnership with the *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise* (CATPC) as referenced above, which was founded in the South of the DRC in 2014. Described as a grassroots platform, this organisation is led by a named group of Congolese plantation workers, an ecologist and a smaller group of Kinshasa-based artists.

There has been a strong critique from anti-colonial scholars and artists regarding the IHA, Martens's relationship to it, and the Congolese community in which it is based. Certainly, the 'white saviour' cliché was at least initially (and perhaps still is) fully utilised within the operations and performance of IHA as an institution, with Martens as its figurehead. Most commonly used in relation to cinema (and indeed certain charitable and philanthropic activities), the white saviour complex describes the self-serving actions of a white person - within a 'regime of representation' (Hall, 1996, p443) - who supposedly seeks to help non-white people or persons, particularly (but not exclusively) those in Africa. It is a colonial relationship, with the non-white person/ people in a subservient role, benefitting from the white persons largesse and inherent goodness. TV Tropes describes it as a 'sister trope to the Magical Negro' (tvtropes.org, 2019), where a heroic white character rescues abject people of colour from their miserable plights, often whilst learning valuable insights about themselves.[109] Even when the film is supposedly about, for example, trans-Atlantic enslavement (Amistad, 1997), 'inner-city' children (Dangerous Minds, 1996) or African-American domestic workers (The Help, 2011), the subjectivity and sheer goodness of the white character is the dominant note.

Equally, some of the language initially used by Martens was questionable in this regard. I attended a talk at the ICA in London on 26th February 2015, where Martens repeatedly referred to the Congolese workers as 'those people' or 'these people' and claimed, 'these people' thought of him as 'a God'. To me, it appeared that Martens (as the dominant public face of the organisation, and the embodiment of white, male privilege) had embraced with glee the role of the colonial overseer – or if one is to be generous, colonial benefactor. Is this the model of social relations needed for the 21st century?

It appears that, in the intervening years, Martens has modified his position, and learned to critically examine his privilege (at least to some extent) in respect to working within one of the most impoverished communities in the world. By placing himself in the position as that community's conduit to the wealthy Euro-American art world (and potential access to life-

109 Other terms describing the same phenomenon include 'Mighty Whitey' and 'White Man's Burden.'

changing capital) in which he has made his own not inconsiderable wealth, the power relations, colonial historical memory and contemporary North/ South power differentials are sometimes painfully re-encoded and re-enacted. But might they yet be re-imagined altogether?

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The Silent University and Our Neighbours with Tania Bruguera: Towards Community

The Silent University (2012 - present) and *Our Neighbours* (2018-19*)* are both examples of artists utilising their creative capital in support of engendering cross-cultural collaboration, explicitly speaking to the current question of Europe's response to issues of migration.

Turkish artist Ahmet Ogut (b.1981) developed *The Silent University* with the support of the Delfina Foundation and Tate Modern in 2012, as a 'solidarity based knowledge exchange platform by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants… led by a group of lecturers, consultants and research fellow's (The Silent University, 2017). *The Silent University* operates by partnering with arts organizations (mainly galleries) for the production of workshops, courses, performances and other discursive, public-facing work. It provides opportunities for highly skilled refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to utilize their skills in their 'host' countries where – because of their status – they are currently unable to do so. Its politics is timely, as Europe faces the ongoing political reality of migration in its various forms.

The Silent University also operates under an easily identifiable visual identity. Its logo is in the shape of a heraldic crest (much like a heritage university) featuring a black writing on a yellow background. Events have usually taken place within semi formal settings that could be read as installations, libraries or other learning spaces which also utilises this colour way. Ogut's approach influenced my development of ABIFR's logo as it helped me to understand the important of branding and a strong visual aesthetic for this type of work, especially as think tanks also tend to have logos.

Fig. 35 Tate Neighbours / Tania Bruguera (2018), *Our Neighbours with Tania Bruguera,* Tate Exchange. Participants are photographed outside the newly named Natalie Bell Building. [Digital photograph]. (Credit: Tate.)

Our Neighbours with Tania Bruguera formed part of the Cuban artists' 2018 Hyundai Commission for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. It was programmed as part of Tate Exchange, a social practice-focused platform at Tate, for which Bruguera (b.1968) was the corresponding lead artist during 2018–2019. A working group - *Tate Neighbours* - consisting of a roughly demographically accurate group of 21 people from the local area, met on a bi-weekly basis for the six months prior to the commission's unveiling. I propose reading *Tate Neighbours* as an in-house think tank, in relation to the way in which the group produced systematic approaches to planning for impact, aiming to make a difference within the context of Tate as an institution, and their neighbourhood and society more generally (taken from Selee, 2013.) The group worked with relative independence from the main Turbine Hall commissioning process, but were responsive to it.[110] Participants were paid an equal

110 Although Tate Exchange and the Tate exhibition curating team work within the same institution, Tate Exchange has a degree of relative autonomy. It is not obliged to programme in response to the exhibition programme, for example.

amount for their time, and directly engaged not only with each other, but the artist herself, and members of Tate staff, including the Director, Francis Morris.

During this intensive, and undoubtedly challenging, period of focussed collaboration and communication, *Our Neighbours* utilised the think tank's potential to influence and affect transformation in ways that are materially apparent to the visiting public, at least in the short term. For example, focusing on the idea of neighbourliness, and the physical and emotional experience of migration, this project instituted a rewriting of the Tate's Terms and Conditions (accessed when signing up to use their Wi-Fi) inviting the public to identify their interests and commit to action in the service of civic responsibility.

Most radically, they also lobbied for, and won, a name change in the building, traditionally offered in exchange for large donations from benefactors. Instead, during the project year, the entire Boiler House extension was renamed after Natalie Bell, a local community activist, selected by the *Neighbours* as a mark of respect and recognition. This renaming was made permanent in October 2019 (The Art Newspaper, 2019). Thus, the think tank's knowledge generation capacity reimagines and reinvigorates the possibility of the civic superseding the monetary in terms of social value within the institution of the gallery.

The Institute for the Art & Practice of Dissent at Home

Liverpool-based, *The Institute for the Art & Practice of Dissent at Home* (2007-) operates on a more intimate scale. Originally run as a domestic institution within a family council home, it then moved to a private property in another part of the city. The institute was created in 2007[111] by Gary Anderson, Lena Simic and their four children as a critical response to the city's year as the 2008 European Capital of Culture. Its finances are 10% of the family's entire income (two adult wages, child benefit and tax credits). Thus, the Institute negates the influence of art capital, whilst still relying on the cultural capital of the family. Artists, curators and other cultural workers apply via open submission to run projects at / with the IAPDH including Reverend Billy, PLATFORM and Virtual Migrants.

111 The IAPDH website has records up to 2018 and does not appear to have run any domestic projects since that time.

The Institute's commitment to financial transparency is demonstrated by information available on their website (updated yearly) declaring their income – thus, what constitutes 10% of it – including a breakdown of the monthly budget for its activities.

Artists were invited to set up in residence at the IAPDH where 'traditional' family life is the performative bedrock of the institution. However, the financial openness and literal open-door policy undermine the roles 'traditional' families are expected to play in British culture (and by extension, so-called Western culture in general). How much do you know about your neighbour's finances? How many 'ordinary' families are you aware of who keep a room available for artists to live and work in for set periods of time? IAPDH not only complicates the meaning of the institutional welcome, but also the meaning of family life – and by extension community – itself. And what is a more potentially performative social structure than the family unit? [112]

Space Think Tanks

It would be remiss to neglect space travel in my account of the role of think tanks. The field is heavily populated with think tanks, particularly as federal funding to NASA decreased from the 1970s onwards (The Guardian, 2011). Over the past decade, there has been an exponential growth in private spaceflight companies such as Virgin Galactic ('together we open space to change the world for good,' virgingalactic, 2019), Space X (who have worked with artists including Tavares Strachan) and Blue Origin ('we're committed to building a road to space so our children can build the future,' blueorigin, 2019), whose style of mission statements were certainly appropriated by *ABIFR* ('*We Build the Future*.')

NASA has sought to leverage its own capacities in partnership with private companies (NASA.org, 2019a), and as mentioned in *The Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future* chapter, Dr Mae Jemison is the principal officer of the *100 Year Star Ship* project (Starship, 2013), which aims to make human interstellar travel possible within 100 years. When I first started to develop the *ABIFR*, the *100 Year Star Ship* was a significant

112 It is worth noting that there appears to be no record of the response of the children in the family to this activity, which would provide a much more complete picture of the overall experience.

inspiration. The team initially consisted of five people, mainly women, most of whom were Black. The affective charge of seeing so many women involved in this initiative proved monumental and overwhelming. I returned to the 'About Us' page on their website often, just to remind myself that this was a reality (although not the reality of the sci-fi movies and television programmes I consumed.) It was a similar experience as that described in the *Octavia E. Butler* chapter, but on this occasion I did not have to turn to fiction and the imagination.

At time of writing, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic have just made their virgin private spaceflights, (on 20th July 2021 11th July 2021 respectively) flying near or above the Kármán line (100 kilometres above Earth's mean sea level), enabling owners Jeff Bezos and Sir Richard Branson- who both participated in these flights - to officially declare themselves astronauts in the USA.[113] Their claim is, by making space tourism possible, space travel will no longer be an activity for highly trained fighter pilots, scientists or engineers, and will instead potentially become a feasible holiday choice for the super-wealthy, eventually becoming a less expensive option for a broader range of people. As with flight in the early twentieth century, one can now conceive of space travel as one of many holiday options in the not-too-distant future. Surely the extractive, violent practice of extraction (Yusoff, 2018) is not too far away thereafter.

The problematic language of space colonisation betrays the imperial genesis of much of space exploration emanating from the Euro-American axis. It is the language of the kinds of forces that enslaved, annexed, tortured and under developed the Majority World during the period of colonisation, and in economic and political terms continues to do so. Space travel, after all, emerged during the Cold War, where Majority World countries were proxy locations for a conflict between the USA and the USSR, including a range of neo-colonial activities - invasions, geological exploitation, economic deprivation (Yusoff, 2018). Additionally, early NASA astronauts were often fighter pilots (Treat, Bennett, Turner, 2020) – selected for their bravery, sense of adventure and ability to follow a chain of command.

113 There is no international legal definition of the boundary between Earth and space. Nasa formerly used the Kármán line 100-kilometre rule, but adjusted to accommodate a lower range of distance to accommodate the United States Armed Forces rules in 2005 (Drake, 2018.)

Often unexplored within conversations around commercial and national space programmes is the relationship between space research and military research (Gonzalez, 1999.) The *100 Year Starship* project, for example, is jointly funded by the U.S Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and NASA (Starship, 2021.) There is something inherently dystopic about the promise of colonisation of another planet, something quintessentially sf. It is as if, anticipating with the imminent ecological collapse of our own planet (*IPCC*, 2021), the white, male billionaire class seek fresh territory to exploit. I cannot help but imagine the novels Octavia Butler would have written within this context; instead of the new, multi-ethnic, neo-faith-based community pioneering new life for humanity off planet in *The Parable of the Talents* (Butler, 1993) we have space tourism for billionaires during a global pandemic and financial crisis for many (imf.org, 2021.)

NASA's online library has a whole section devoted to 'space colonisation,' (NASA.org, 2019b) for example, and a quick Google search of the term resulted in over 299,000,000 references in 2019 (when I wrote the first draft of this chapter) and 42,100,000 in August 2021. A substantial growth that perhaps speaks to the increased publicity given to the billionaire astronaut class in anticipation of their flights.

Challenging this colonist impulse – and thinking about more cooperative models of community building – was essential to *ABIFR*, and is imperative to the futures imagined by *Hailing Frequencies Open*. *ABIFR* occupied a space between these commercial ventures, the political think tank - and in conversation with other artist-led projects - looked to the commons and to the real-life stories of women whose contributions to futurity are neglected, in conversation with their fictional counterparts.

It is interesting now to look back on my research into think tank-type structures in relation to arts practice and cultural impact, not least because my work has developed into *HFO*, in the ways discussed in the *Incomplete Encyclopaedia of the Black Woman in the Future* chapter. The think tank is no longer the driving force for my practice. Nonetheless, it is clear that working through ideas of the potentiality of different organisational structures and their impact on my practice – and the practice of other artists I am in community with, or

sceptical of - has been hugely influential and beneficial for my work and research as well as my understanding of my own potential within the cultural space.

The think tank's role in conferring institutional legitimacy on ideas and its capitalist, colonialist origins provided a subversive potentiality for *ABIFR*, which I am not entirely sure that it entirely fulfilled to its greatest potential, due to my eventual disillusionment with so-called 'socially engaged' (Helguera, 2011) practice. However I find myself returning to *ABIFR* concepts, images, practices and source materials within my teaching practice, and on the rare occasions I run workshops. In many respects, the possibility of uncertainty is what anchored *ABIFR* within the realm of art practice and made the change in direction towards reclaiming a solo practice, making objects and generating my own images of the future, possible.

The sculpture, *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II (2019)* proposes a very different type of space programme, one fuelled by the collective intellectual and cultural impact of Black women progenitors across space and time, fact and fiction. It's navigation instruments seek out the Andromeda Galaxy, the resting place for a mythological African princess, a proposed home for immortal cells - the potential for new ways of life. Ultimately, this is fitting end for a project that began with a think tank.

CONCLUSION

I began this research process by exploring my personal discomfort at being deeply invested in speculative fiction as a genre, yet rarely experiencing the pleasure of representation within it. My research arose out of a recurring, enduring question, where are Black women in the (fictional) future? Furthermore, as speculative fiction is largely concerned with working through contemporary anxieties and 'trying to describe what is in fact going on' *(*Le Guin, 1996, p154), I wondered what the comparative lack of Black female subjects reveals about the contemporary moment. In other words, how could I construct forms of practice where Black women were placed at the centre of speculative narratives and how would I account for this critically?

I set out to explore this question through my research and within the framework of my practice as an artist. What has unfolded over this research period has surprised me, as the process has been led by the questions my practice has asked of me and the demands it has made of me, as opposed to being led by purely theoretical concerns. It has been practice led, with my theoretical articulation metaphorically running to catch up with the art.

As I evidence in this thesis, we are witnessing a remarkably energising time in the prominence of speculation. Speculative practice and praxis is being utilised as a creative and aesthetic tool, and as an activator in the cause of social justice, actively asserting a form of cultural / aesthetic restitution and creating future-making tools for practitioners from formerly marginalised subjectivities, especially in the expanded field of Black futurities being developed across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993) and beyond.

This speculative turn manifests itself across disciplines, with artists and theorists working with questions of gender, agency, anti-colonialism, sexuality and the reclamation of previously neglected cultural perspectives, including Kathryn Yusoff, andre carrington, Larry Achiampong, Kipwani Kiwanga, and Simone Leigh. There are also radical perspectives that have influenced my work that this thesis does not have space to include, particularly work on sexuality and gender as exemplified by the work of Evan Ifekoya and Jacobly Satterwhite

amongst others, Lee Edelman's work on queer reproduction (Edelman,2004) and adrienne maree brown's writings on sexuality and pleasure activism (brown, 2019).[114]

Speculation is additionally an essential component in the work of activist-theorists including brown, who has given us the useful term 'emergent strategy' (brown, 2017) and a series of critical and practical tools to precipitate this process of 'emergence' to describe the way that 'complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions' (brown, 2017, p13.) that I propose characterises the practices on discussion in this thesis, in particular my own practice.

Form and Structure

Fig. 36 ABIFR (2017) *Performance Skills for Activists, CJSS.* [Workshop]. Part of the Claudia Jones Space Station, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Arts. (Credit: CJSS.)

Early works, often within the context of so-called 'socially engaged' (Helguera, 2011) or 'discursive' (Kester, 2005) practice reimagined organisational structures within a gallery context. Projects such as the *Claudia Jones Space Station* (2017) (Fig 36) redistributed institutional financial capital (the budget) to expand the invitation I received (whilst taking

114 I have not focused on sexuality and queerness in this thesis but recognize the important space those working in this area have created, and the work they have made possible.

on the role of a think tank) to activists, collectives and communities within the Newcastle / Gateshead area whose work was concerned with issues relating to the life of the eponymous Trinidad-born activist, journalist and carnival pioneer. In doing so, the project aimed to ground the concept of the space station – a place where multiple forms of activity and engagement can take place at the same time, independent but yet related. Whilst scientists aboard a space station might conduct experiments that could help humans live in space settlements in the future, the CJSS invited the public to conduct experiments that might improve life here on earth and propose a different future.

Structures with colonial legacies and hegemonic utility such as the monument, the think tank and the encyclopaedia are also reimagined and revisioned as part of my work and research. Artist Simone Leigh reaches across the African diaspora to insert the figure of the Black female subject in conversation with histories of art across Africa, Europe and the USA. International duo Ehlers and Belle place a temporary monument of a Black woman revolutionary leader at the heart of a former Empire, forcing Danish society to remember and rethink a colonial history that is often buried within contemporary society, whilst imagining a different future for Black women.

Writers and theorists such as Washington, McKittrick, Cooper Owens and Skloot have been employed to open up ways of thinking about the violent relationship between medical science and the Black, female body as an undeniable feature of colonialism and anti-Blackness. Images and theories of Black futurities that are being created across the diaspora offer potential ways to reconfigure this relationship, by claiming the body and Black intellectual labour for the future, through art.

As an exercise in this reconceptualisation, the encyclopaedia is reimagined as a storytelling device, theorising the *Hailing Frequencies Open* project by both treating the trilogy of influences that lead the project – Andromeda, HeLa and Uhura / Nichelle Nichols – as subjects that contain multitudes. By creating separate entries for aspects of each figure, I make note of the complexity not only of the figures themselves, but of my conceptualisation of them as part of my project. The colonial structure and history of the encyclopaedia, its formation as a device of categorising, labelling and deciding what information about whom /

where / what is relevant to 'civilised' life and worthy of being recognised is undermined, and reconsidered. The nature of order itself, in this case alphabetisation, is denied in favour of a series of open connections, outcomes and possibilities.

Self Determination

Unearthed artefacts become unexpectedly influential when they are reimagined and redistributed by artists, such as the various notes and letters Octavia E. Butler wrote to herself. By recirculating this letter within the context of the *Seven Generation* workshop (Fig 36) across both sides of the Atlantic, I have infused my earlier practice of 'performative pedagogy' (Lamm Pineau: 1994) as a way of reproducing the sentiment of self-determination discussed in the *Octavia E. Butler* chapter. Through this note, ideas around the construction of self and imagining the future as an active, generative practice are expanded beyond the page.

Fig. 37 Sonya Dyer (2018) *Seven Generations* [Workshop]. Image taken from workshop at Jamboree, Dartington Hall, which used Butler's note to self as a starting point. (Credit: Sonya Dyer.)

The mantra, 'So Be It! See To It!' (Butler, c1984) reaffirms and reinforces Butler's commitment to her own future and determination that the fictive futures of her imagination take form and find audience. The letter makes space for a radical empathy with the author, and for further reflection on the conditions of artistic labour, which is additionally discussed in chapter *The Uses of Design Fiction*, which further explores my previous 'socially engaged'

(Helguera, 2011) work and the challenges this presented for my understanding of what my practice was and could be.

Emergent theorisations

brown and Imarisha, drew upon the groundwork laid by Butler in their own work, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (brown, Imirisha: 2015), editing the anthology and connecting art, activism, community and futurity. The title echoes Butler's invented religion 'Earthseed', from her *Parables* series (Butler,1993,1998). During the *Into the Future!* (2015) commission at Primary, Nottingham, the group of women collaborators I recruited worked with *Octavia's Brood* as a core text and developed a conversational relationship with brown and Imarisha. I recall being struck by the generosity of the exchanges between them, and the excitement the authors expressed in knowing their work was impacting women on a different continent, and in a different (but not entirely dissimilar) cultural context**.**

This exemplifies the types of interconnectedness and solidarity that Butler anticipated in her writing, and the kind of generative reproduction that my concept of *Dark Fecundity* speaks to as a defining feature of the forms of Black futurity my work produces and is in conversation with. Equally, brown's articulation of 'emergence*,'* which she describes as being 'beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine' (2017:13) can be read as the coming together of disparate strands to a common end, specifically to imagining and creating futures based on anticolonial relations between human beings, human – animal relations, and our connection to our planet, predicated on mutuality and care. It is multidisciplinary, drawing inspiration from a range of resources, practices, cultures and modes of organising.

One could say that there has been an *emergence* of diverse terminologies to describe the futures that are being imagined and anticipated in global critical and creative practices, as the limitations of *Afrofuturism* (Dery,1995) become increasingly evident. From *Afrofuturism 2.0* (Anderson, Jones, 2016), *Mundane Afrofuturism* (Syms, 2013), *Black Quantum Futurism* (Ayewa, Phillips, 2015-) to non-African diasporic focussed Asian and Indigenous Futurisms such as Gulf Futurism (Al Maria, 2012) and beyond.

My extant theory of *aPOCalypso* should therefore also be seen within this dispersed network of *emergent* (brown, 2017) futurisms a way of describing the cumulative effect of centering previously neglected subjectivities as a means of developing de-colonial aesthetics, practices and potential futures. Crucially *aPOCalypso* was conceived of as non-US centric, of making space for other parts of the diaspora – specifically Caribbean, European – to access a critical apparatus that was inclusive of divergent experiences of futuristic Blackness.

aPOCalypso emerged out of my work as the *…And Beyond Institute for Future Research* think tank, particularly through my need to develop a critical shorthand that could be used during public events, and in my writing. Initially, *ABIFR* operated in ways that were indexical (in creating a depository of images of Black / Brown women involved with space exploration, and distributing those images), performative (utilizing the performance lecture as the primary means of doing so) and collaborative (working with others to create shared cultural experiences.) Thinking through the notion of a potential *aPOCalypsonian* aesthetic was instructive and useful, but also complicated by my ambivalence towards the term 'people of colour,' as I describe in the Methodology chapter.

The think tank as a device has a history that suggests a desire to influence and to change political thought, leading to action (Selee, 2013). My initial interest in this form was contingent on working through the role of the artist as a public figure and the potential of reimaging the think tank as a form that could activate ideas for radical possible futures that could then be distributed. The projects initiated under this rubric were generated by distributing and reproducing existing images, which I then recontextualised in a performative format. This was a useful period in terms of working on ideas through material, conducting my research as a component of public conversations and working through different ways of being with people through my work. Ultimately, however, it proved to be an unsatisfying form of practice, as much driven by market forces in the publicly funded arts sector than my own desires for my practice.

My practice has developed considerably since the end of the *ABIFR* era in 2017/18, and my understanding of my work, the forms I utilize, and the conditions under which I want my

work to be made and exhibited has developed significantly. I have found new ways to explore my interest in the creation and enduring appeal of mythic formulations, ways of storytelling, space travel and Black women's subjectivities, all refracted through making seemingly intangible connections between Black women, their neglected histories, contributions, potentialities and labour.

Reproductive futurity

This shift in practice feels like another process of reclamation, as I continue to find ways to negotiate the economy of life as an artist (i.e. how to obtain financially viable opportunities to make and exhibit new work that results in the art I want to make.) As I embarked on the journey towards finding my own place within my practice, I turned to Butler – whose note to self still hangs on my studio wall – 'So Be It! See To It!' (Butler, c1984.)

This critical body of work on speculation in practice and theory has led to the development of *Hailing Frequencies Open* (2018 -), my on-going project that forms the main practice component of this thesis. *HFO* places Black women at the centre of speculative narratives of the future by exploring the creativity of scientists, the creation of mythologies and reigniting the neglected histories of Black women. I am also in conversation with the history of art, (the whitening of Andromeda, and the tropes and archetypes depicted therein), the monument (from 'living monuments' to sculptural works), the space race (then and now), and the work being undertaken across fields to reclaim the Black, female body from the despicable history of scientific exploitation through generating my own fictive mythologies.

Through *HFO*, my work in imagining the future has also led to a series of conversations with Black women scientists, which will continue beyond this research period. It is exciting to contemplate the possibilities that might arise from this engagement, and the knowledge these scientists possess, and share. In that respect, the repository building impulses of *ABIFR* have found a new formulation, one that is more active and generative than redistributing existing images. The conversational format allows for a significant degree of agency in terms of the topics and types of conversation entered into, for example, as well as allowing for informal exchanges that take place before and after filming, which have thus far proven generative.

This leads to the original theoretical concept that is the dominant element of my work discussed in this thesis – *Dark Fecundity*. *Dark Fecundity* allows for a precision and depth of meaning that *aPOCalypso* did not quite allow access to. By absorbing, reclaiming and reimagining histories of Darkness in relation to Blackness, Dark Fecundity exults the reproductive capacity of HeLa cells as a metaphor for the reproduction of Black futurist ideas, practice and praxis, reimagines the story of Andromeda and places Nichelle Nichols / 'Uhura' in their rightful place as progenitors of the future with regards to sf and space travel.

My practice has taken a new direction, with the introduction of sculpture. *Andromeda Mission: Anarcha Prototype II* (2019) is the first of three monumental structures named after another group of neglected Black women, Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, whose stories connect the narrative charge of the work to the atrocities committed during enslavement. The works monumentalise these women, and propose new possibilities for their stories – leading the way for new futures created for and by Black women. In this sense, this practice of naming is another conceptualisation of the living monument; their eponymous space vessels lead us to myriad potential futures via a journey to Andromeda.

Painted in the most densely pigmented commercially available black paint on the market, and inspired by natural and unnatural forms, this inert object is amplified by the sonic power of *Andromeda's Suffering* (Coltrane, 1973), providing another layer of reference and an intervention by another Black woman artist engaged with Andromeda's story. Shadows created by the sculpture reproduce the form of the vessel, another example of *Dark Fecundity*, of potentially endless reproduction as a virtue, as opposed to a problem. Installed in conversation with videos featuring a 'Greek Chorus' of Black women scientists, and encompassing my recurring use of the Andromeda Galaxy as a visual motif, this exhibition represents the most complete display of my work to date.

By critically thinking through foundational elements of Euro-American anti-Blackness through the biblical rhetoric that infuses European thought and coloniality and the Enlightenment era conception of racial difference as an expression of natural hierarchies – in addition to Black creative resistance which seeks to counter the effects of these

phenomena - I have proposed new forms of Black Futurity twice through this research process. The arc between *aPOCalypso* and *Dark Fecundity* represents an increase in knowledge of my practice and the context it operates within. By allowing myself space, time and distance (challenging when work is being produced and theorised simultaneously) I have developed a greater understanding of the awesome power of Black reproductive futurity, as it manifests in the form of *Dark Fecundity*. This concept is the context in which my ideas germinate and manifest into works of art. It also provides a language that aptly describes and creates critical context for discussion of the proliferation of Black futurist narratives in contemporary culture more broadly, especially in television and film.

With this in mind, I shall end this thesis as I began, with a recent fictional character. In the film *Black Panther* (2018), as well as the ensemble movies *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018, all Marvel Cinematic Universe), the character 'Shuri'[115] (Letitia Wright) is a teenage scientific genius and inventor from the fictional, technologically advanced African nation of 'Wakanda,' whose creations are essential to the protection of her homeland, the lives of their new allies and ultimately in saving the world from alien threats.

115 'Shuri' first appeared in the comic book *Black Panther* Vol 1 # 2 in May 2005.

Fig. 38 'Shuri' (2018). Scene from the cinematic film, *Black Panther* [Film still]. (Credit: Marvel Studios.)

Through Shuri, a new generation of young Black girls have the opportunity to see a rendition of a fantastical alternative future in their own image. Shuri comes replete with the visual and aesthetic qualities redolent in so much of the new Black Futurist work being made at the present moment. She wears natural hair and clothing that is a resonant of a generalised African influenced style combined with modernist simplicity. Although her mind is her main weapon, she has invented weaponised gauntlet's that she wears when entering battle. As Ruth E. Carter (b.1960), *Black Panther's* hugely influential costume designer (who won an Academy Award for her work on the film) states, 'we are creating something for the future, because we're standing firm in our voices at the present time' (Harper's Bazaar, 2018.)

In the video work I made with her[116], biological scientist Dr Miranda Lowe mentions that people have started making comparisons between herself and 'Shuri,' (despite 'Shuri' being

116 *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Miranda Lowe* (2019.)

fictional, and an engineer). I return to this part of the video, at least in part because of the bemused, yet flattered, laughter Lowe releases when she reveals this information.

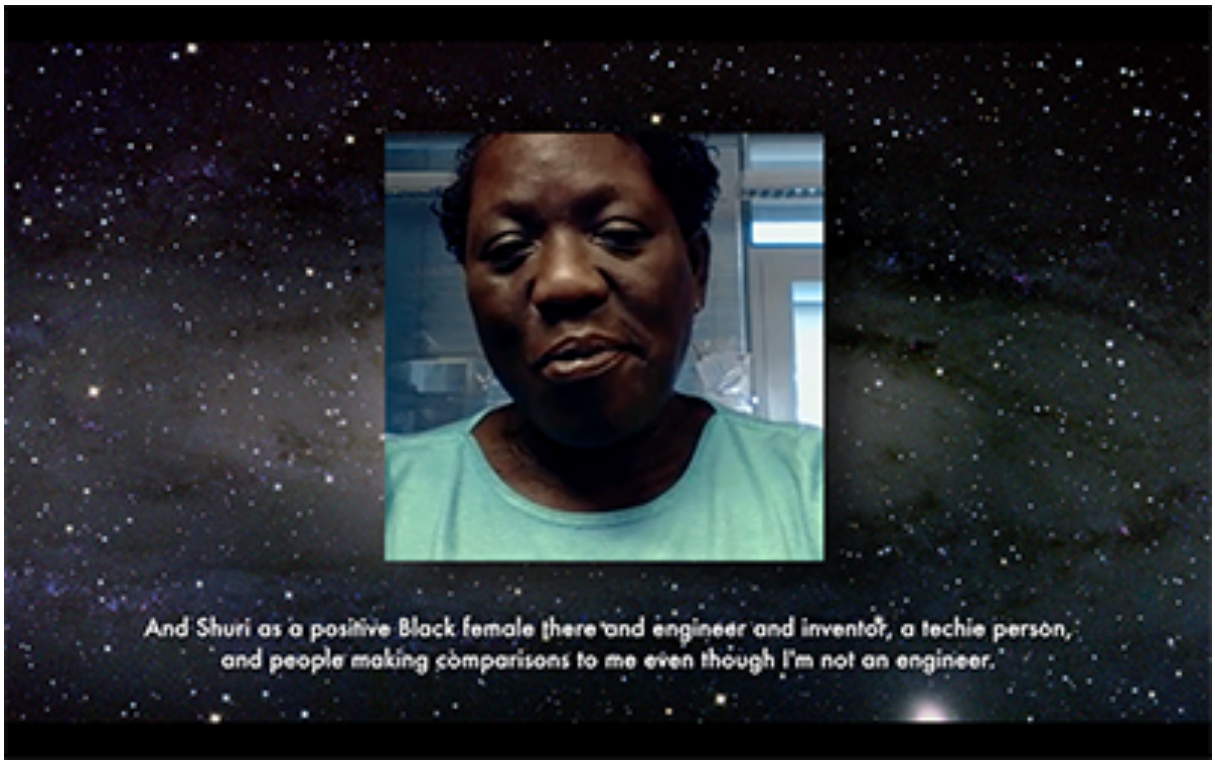

Fig. 39 Sonya Dyer (2019), *Hailing Frequencies Open: Dr Miranda Lowe* [Video still.]

Her unique experience of both invisibility and hyper visibility, as one of the few Black women in her field, meets it avatar in the most visible fictional Black female scientist whose image is currently in circulation in the broader culture. Dr Lowe is involved in a battle to preserve the habitat of marine life, which is also saving the world. This self-reflexive revelation occurs at around 1’32’’ and is a moment that foregrounds the reproductive work *Dark Fecundity* is capable of. Fiction, reality and invisibility transform into hyper visibility. Mistranslation, humour and generosity all combine. I propose that these few seconds are the most fitting culmination of my body of research, the apotheosis of my enquiry into Black, female centred futurities, a pathway towards Dark Fecundity - and the perfect place to conclude this thesis.

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