A Reconvening of Black Diasporic Voices Through Aesthetics and Poetry

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Abstract

When Black scholars study Black literature, they may find aesthetic value where others missed it.

In chapter one, I study Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* using theories from Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Biman Basu's "Linguistic and Libidinal Progressions in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*," and John McWhorter's *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca*. Gilroy and Lorde help assert that Black British writers have a not-so-British identity to represent, often without the formality of presentation or the auspice of digestibility. Sam Selvon's novel was an exercise in proving that he mastered English poetics and could now create a new form of novel by breaking out of genre boundaries.

In chapter two, I study two novels, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds*, using the social undercurrent of Toure's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now* featuring Michael Eric Dyson. Danez Smith's poem "dinosaurs in the hood" becomes theory. I also used the theories of contemporary and prolific writer Nnedi Okorafor and her own theoretical terminology, Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism. Contemporary Black writers like Micaiah Johnson can self-define the boundaries of our artforms even if we have not always done so. Increasingly our desire is for both aesthetics and thematic elements outside of any allegiance to the white gaze and all Black artists are eligible to add to the collective self-definition.

In chapter three, I study Danez Smith's collection of poems *Don't Call Us Dead* using theories from Dagmawi Woubshet's *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*. Woubshet refers to the insistence on continued production of art and perseverance beyond oppression as "insurgent mourning" (47). I provide a critique of a now-prolific young Black poet whose work should be more widely studied for the way it does not avoid the reality of Black lives but transcends the pain.

In all cases, my concern is in outlining a new or reinvigorated Black aesthetics: an approach to criticism and evaluation that centers aesthetics, linguistic levity, and adaptive poetics.

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Introduction

When Black scholars study Black literature, they may find aesthetic value where others missed it. Historically, that has been the case with what was once accepted as the "Black Expressive Domain" (Fuller). The tradition of Black Literature has become a confusing textual space in United States arts and letters over the last sixty years or so. It seems to be loosely split between African Americans (hereafter Black Americans unless quoting directly), Black people from the rest of the diaspora, especially Africa and the Caribbean, and people with black skin who wish the color would always be ignored in the new social ideologies of postracialism.[1] The work of Black Americans was historically very often a response to the history of slavery, while Black writers throughout the diaspora referenced slavery and colonialism but their work tended to be less defined by it.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) and the Negritude Movement made strides in developing art from cultural identity independent of the white gaze. In his book *Afro-American Poetics*, Houston A. Baker lays out the major ways Hoyt Fuller contributed to "a vision of emergent writers creating in accordance with distinctively black criteria and being judged by criteria adduced by black critics" (161). Fuller was the editor of three Black literary journals: *Negro Digest*, *Black World*, and *First World*. In those, Fuller provided a space where Black scholars could do exactly as he prescribed in the article "Towards a Black Aesthetic." In it, he proposed that there be Black standards and Black people who are trained to measure by those standards. In Chicago, Amiri Baraka and his radical team were motivated "to raise and unite the consciousness of the oppressed Afro-American people, so that they better understand themselves as well as better resist their enemies" (Baraka 17). Baraka was contributing to the work to make this real. His collaborative "put forth the concept in the organization called the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School" or BARTS (Baraka 12). He explains, "we received opposition because we called for Black art to define itself and speak for itself from the security of its own institutions" (Baraka 18). Fuller had already begun the work of "publishing the thoughtful essays, the fiction and the poetry of

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[1] For my purposes, postracial is the only logical term. "Post-black" does not make sense because, if society is beyond thinking of race, we are beyond all race, not just Blackness.

both known and unknown writers, reporting on the arts, educational movements and innovations, and guarding against the opportunists and charlatans who would exploit Black Art and Literature for their own gain and for the spiritual and artistic colonization of Black people" (Fuller, SOS). Fuller's publications lasted until 1976.

Perhaps, though, BAM militance hurt business, so the critics turned their back on Black literature and aesthetics, while the Academy was already disinterested. There were even prevalent disagreements among Black people about the necessity of separation. These arguments are contemporarily most often cast as postracial ideology. The BAM artists wanted to self-segregate and insulate themselves from prejudice rather than being forced to segregate and being at the mercy of white critics. I theorize that the BAM did not last because it was too political and not solely artistic. It was artistic and produced work that we all still study sixty years later, but the art and the politics were always two sides of the same coin. I wonder if the politics had only served to quietly undergird the arts, whether remnants of it would have endured in more prevalent ways than it did. In the 1970s and 1980s, the collective Black perspective leaned more to assimilation and sameness than pride in difference.

In between the 1920s Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s Black Arts Movement in the United States, a simultaneous Black Aesthetic and identifying movement was occurring in the Caribbean. Aime Cesaire and Frantz Fanon are oft-quoted scholars in the field called "Negritude." Charles Rowell interviewed Aime Cesaire in 1989 about his impact on the Negritude movement and Black literature. He mentions that, in the Caribbean, they were influenced by Black American writers mentioned in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* anthology of the Harlem Renaissance. Cesaire attributes the foundation of the Negritude movement to the Black American revolt against anti-Black racism (Rowell 990). Black Caribbeans were also developing language to divest themselves of the colonizers' influence. Cesaire's famous poem, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*, was interpreted by Edmonson as a "defiant assertion that he cares a little or nothing about white world distortions of black world achievements and potential" because "'... no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory'" (94-95).

Taking the BAM, the Negritude, and contemporarily the Black Lives Matter movements into consideration, there is an increasing desire for both aesthetics and thematic elements outside of any allegiance to the white gaze, and all Black artists are eligible to add to the collective self-definition. This thesis starts in London with the Trinidadian Sam Selvon and travels to the Afrofuturistic world of Micaiah Johnson's making. The poet Danez Smith serves as a connection point between the past, present, and future as their work serves as theoretical model and exemplar of the Black Aesthetic.

In chapter one, I study Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, which was an exercise in proving that he mastered English poetics and could now create a new form of novel by breaking out of genre boundaries. I use theories from Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Biman Basu's "Linguistic and Libidinal Progressions," and John McWhorter's *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca*. Gilroy and Lorde help assert that Black British writers have a not-so-British identity to represent. Sam Selvon's novel displays how often that representation occurs without formality or digestibility.

In chapter two, I study two novels, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds*, using the social undercurrent of Toure's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now* featuring Michael Eric Dyson. Dyson warns us that Black people have to define Blackness outside of the "response to oppression" and teaches how to transcend the community's latent traumas related to the white gaze (xiv). In the end of his essay, Dyson assures that we can "be rooted in but not restricted by" Blackness "when we leave everything to our imagination" (xviii). Also, Danez Smith's poem "dinosaurs in the hood" becomes theory alongside the theories of contemporary and prolific writer Nnedi Okorafor and of David Wittenberg, who wrote *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*. Contemporary Black writers like Micaiah Johnson can self-define the boundaries of our artforms even if we have not always done so.

In chapter three, I study Danez Smith's collection of poems *Don't Call Us Dead* using theories from Dagmawi Woubshet's *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of*

AIDS. I clarify Woubshet's theory that an insistence on continued production of art and perseverance beyond oppression can be called "insurgent mourning" (47). I provide a critique of a now-prolific young Black poet, Danez Smith, whose work should be more widely studied for the way it does not avoid the reality of Black lives but transcends the pain.

Baker, in the chapter of his book written as a dedication to Hoyt Fuller, called these elements our "Black expressive domain" (162). His terminology of "Afro-American expressiveness" serves as a broader and preliminary term for the "Black Aesthetic" which Fuller helped to define. Baraka, in relating his point about a Black establishment, says "The deepest hunger in our souls" is "the urge to democracy to self-determination, the understanding that no matter how much we might be 'recognized' or 'accepted' or even lionized as artists, we were still somehow burdened with the disorienting realization of alienation" (12). Fuller does not even indict this same alienation as racism. "The essential point here is not the presence of overt hostility;" he writes, "it is the absence of clarity of vision. The glass through which black life is viewed by white Americans is, inescapably... befogged by the hot breath of history. True 'objectivity' where race is concerned is as rare as a necklace of Hope diamonds" (Fuller 152).

Black aestheticians around the world pursue arts just as "everything human beings in whatever part of the world have undertaken to cope with life, to make life easier to live and to face death" (Rowell 992). White writers have for centuries been lauded for doing their self-actualization in public. People of color have never been allowed, much less lauded, for doing the same. "Negritude was for us away of asserting ourselves. First, the affirmation of ourselves, of the return to our own identity, of the discovery of our own selves" (Rowell 992). Every human who wants to make art wants to be able to do so in the safest way possible. One of the elements that makes way for safety is exclusivity and separation; a refuge, not a banishment. You cannot critically immerse yourself in Black literature without a working knowledge of Black politics. The topics and themes will surface. This thesis project presupposes that there are nuances in literature by Black people that non-Black readers are likely to miss completely or misunderstand. That said, Black writers are also masters of craft, so the most interesting elements of Black writing are not the common themes or tropes but the unique implementations of form. This thesis

seeks to explore those.

A Term

John McWhorter's book is *Talking Back Talking Black*, and in it he uses the term "Black English" to describe what is also often called African American Vernacular English (AAVE—formerly American Black Vernacular English ABVE and American Black English Vernacular ABEV interchangeably). Like McWhorter, I use Black English in this thesis because it is shorter, clearer, and more to the point.

A Content Warning

Selvon's novel includes much profanity. I did not quote it all, of course, but both profanities in the form of "swear" words and in the form of vulgar names for people, especially women, as well as anatomy are present. Depending on where one has learned their slang and their racial slurs, some of his made-up pidgin may include uncomfortable terms to name Black people.

While I do not quote any profanities from Johnson's novel, if you read it, some are present. Smith's poem and quotations from *Kindred* do include the racial slur "nigger" and its reclaimed Black English derivation "nigga."

Smith's poems use the word "nigga" with regularity. I did not attempt to cite them all or to shy away from any of them. Smith also uses other vulgarities, and when reading their books, be prepared for some displays of sex that are more explicit than I quoted. I euphemised the sex where I felt it would not take away from analysis in order to offset the potential racial discomfort. Smith also uses the "f-slur" more than a few times across their work. In the chapter, I spell it out in text only when quoting them and avoid in this introduction as I am not a member of that intersectional identity. In addition, Woubshet discusses Negro spirituals and I refer to them as that for consistency.

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Chapter One

A Reading of the Multivocal Narrative and Black English

Reading *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon, it becomes immediately obvious that Selvon subverts linguistic and structural norms: a fact which may cause a dissonance from the contextualization of the novel within the traditions of British literature. This discordant series of thoughts come into tune when there is a recalibration toward a tradition of literature written in an English-based language, pidgin, or creole. This phenomenon is analyzed herein through Selvon's grammar and diction and varied points of view. By not proving clear narrative themes, the novel lends its critical place to the overarching idea of Black diasporic multivocity. Black people, through our arts, demand to be reckoned with but not reconciled in all of our facets. This chapter will explore narrative as liberation language. It will analyze how *The Lonely Londoners* features the tendency away from a tight narrative arch, a heavy focus on indirect characterization, and linguistic diversions. Selvon's wide range of points of view undertake an unwieldy array of topics with an irreverent tone meant to convey the quotidian (despite being foreign to his audience). This chapter will use multiple theorists, especially Paul Gilroy and Audre Lorde, to assert that Black British writers have a not-so-British identity to represent, often without the formality of presentation or the auspice of digestibility.

Academics have been tempted to read *The Lonely Londoners* and impose upon it a label of modern or early postmodern. While good arguments can be made for either (more so postmodern), I suggest that the ways in which Black writers of the diaspora fit into these categories is more fraught than the ways their contemporary non-Black writers would have fit.[2] Gilroy's ideas about modernity and Blackness are complicated, as evidenced by the title of his book and the title of the first chapter: "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity." He asserted that the stylizations exemplified in this chapter are "characteristically modern phenomena" because of the ways they challenge historical ideas of race and culture (2). Gilroy's explanation focuses on DuBois and Delaney and perhaps for them and other

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[2] The labels of modern or postmodern are largely irrelevant to the Black diaspora and primarily apply to the dominant culture.

Black writers of the time (though I think not Selvon) these linguistic diversions are a marker of modernity. Gilroy explicitly writes: “Any shift towards a postmodern condition should not” mean the “power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has been left behind” (2). In other words, whichever the era, the authors’ points and their impacts must be retained. At the end of the same chapter, Gilroy asked about the “reluctant intellectual affiliation of diaspora blacks” and emphasized that “Euro-American modernity…determines the manner in which nationality is understood” (30). I assert, along his line of questioning, that since (not if) Euro-American ideologies are not the sole determinant of anything in the present age, perhaps Black people ought to reconsider nationality and affiliation (but not always in tandem). My work attempts to widen the lens even further by not assuming that anything Euro-American is standard and by instead contending with what we know to be true: Black people across the diaspora have existed and told stories from the beginning. The extent to which each author falls neatly or not at all into the structural norms of the era in the region and language of their colonizer is not the point. To side with Gilroy’s mildly convoluted (although necessary and foundational for our conversation) point about modernism or postmodernism is to skirt the issue. To recalibrate, we have to go back further. Black stories started as completely oral, learned and retained for the community by the elders and the official djelis. Black diaspora stories then moved from mostly spoken to sometimes written. Throughout the still ongoing process of their transliteration, critics began and will continue to analyze the ways the “texts” both do and do not mirror Western artistic modes. Neither in this chapter nor in any of my work is the primary focus to assess how well Black stories match non-Black, especially European, stories or modes of storytelling. That is working with “the master’s tools,” when the work of my thesis and the authors I chose to analyze serve to “dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2).

This chapter will focus on departures from the individualism of the modern era and the disregard for tradition of the postmodern era and display the text’s commitment to an ideal other than “the master’s tools” (Lorde 2). In her landmark speech-turned-essay, Audre Lorde explained that “polarities” among people (or characters) create a “dialectic” and the dialectic makes space for community and “the necessity of interdependency” (1). Selvon’s characters in *The Lonely Londoners* have this community firmly in

hand; Selvon as the author seems committed to all their stories equally. Where Eurocentric writers during the time of publication reacted to the World Wars and chaos by immediately separating their characters and creating lone heroes and antiheroes, Black writers' archetypal characters remained in their communities (or else).

As we establish and dismiss terms, let us bring in Bakhtin's study of polyphony, which he explains as "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6). This polyphony both is and is not what I would like to concede Selvon uses in his novel. I would like to contend with the strictly Bakhtinian definition of polyphony and return to Gilroy, who used the word to describe a different phenomenon. He asserted in the first chapter of *The Black Atlantic* that "black cultural expression" has "polyphonic qualities" (32). In his third chapter, on "Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity," he describes polyphony as the way Black writers push back against a language that cannot encompass our story. He discusses the ways that music adds layers that storytellers previously did not have access to, but with modernity became free to integrate in their writing. Because I believe in plain language to the extent that it is possible and because, in my theoretical practice, linguistic etymology and definitions overshadow the creative ways that literary theorists play with terminology, here are the terms I have chosen. Polyphony, etymologically, means "many sounds" and does not fully encompass the phenomena I am describing. While sound is obviously related to voice (Bakhtin used "voices"), in literature we often call the analysis of a character's or author's point of view an analysis of their voice. This chapter will not focus primarily on the ontological or cultural points of view in Selvon's novel, but on the sonic voices, the way the language sounds while these points are being made. Additionally, my thesis departs from Gilroy's specific language while using his concepts. He, like many, uses "voice" to refer to a person's rhetoric and ideology, the impact and meaning of their words and writing. Therefore, I will follow Gilroy's explanation of polyphony and its necessity in Black literature: to push back and to add layers. However, to differentiate from a strictly Bakhtinian interpretation, the term "multivocity" will be used in place of Gilroyesque polyphony. My work is interested in the differences in sounds, in tones, in voices,

not only in the differences in characters, storylines, and points of view and will continue to trace the idea of multivocity and the "musicality of words"[3] in *The Lonely Londoners*.

Language Mixtures and the Grammar of Identity

The language of Selvon's novel is the first aspect a reader must contend with, and unfamiliarity begins on the first page of the narrative, with "unrealness…as if not London at all but some strange place on another planet" (15). The tone is immediately bleak as the narrator situates the reader in a place where the characters are physically uncomfortable. Although Selvon wastes no time introducing his created pidgin,[4] he does ease into its fullness. He starts simply with a slightly non-standard grammar: "when it had" —a pronoun missing its antecedent—and "Moses Aloetta hop on" —a verb that does not agree with its noun (15). He introduces terms that the reader has to assume are either 1950s Black British slang or Selvon's created pidgin: "fellar" —the spelling indicating off-standard pronunciation —and "boat-train" (15).

In one of several repeated phrases in the novel, Moses is described as having "a heart so soft that he always doing something for somebody" (15). But with a small note of resentment on Moses's behalf, the narrator clarifies his role as caretaker: "and nobody ever doing anything for him" (15). As the narrator further explains that Moses had been, over his nearly ten years in London, unofficially made into something "like a welfare officer," Selvon shows the pidgin in dialogue with other recently emigrated West Indians (16).

Selvon's language establishes tone in the way that inextricably binds character to place. While contrasting the West Indian characters to London's white population, Selvon establishes a harmonious series of narrative styles, archetypal frame narratives, and tones because the diction and syntax are

[3] Famous poet and spoken word artist Edward Mabrey first presented this idea to me in a track, "Robert Johnson Teaches Sekou Sundiata How to Play the Blues" from his album, "The Un."

[4] Selvon himself and many scholars (namely Fabre) acknowledge that the novel's vernacular is not one that exists anywhere in actuality but is Selvon's own creation. The creation is a point that will be addressed later in the chapter.

indicative of the characters and their settings and back stories. Selvon also begins to just scratch the surface of his literary range when he places readers in "the Water" and tests our aesthetic skills with pidgin (15). He teases the reader about the sociopolitical climate without much elaboration: "the English people starting to make a rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country: this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade" (15). The alliteration of the t's and b's, the assonance in bound and bounce, and sonic qualities of the phrase as a whole shift the tone for the third time on one page to the irreverence, or dark humor, that is carried throughout.

On the novel's second page, Selvon introduces "the boys" and begins to layer the ways and reasons they have emigrated to England. With the introduction of two characters is the addition of two more histories, two more attitudes toward London, two more ways of being a Black West Indian in an Anglophone country. Moses is at the boat-train to meet Henry Oliver (soon to be nicknamed Sir Galahad) but runs into Tolroy, who is greeting his family. Moses's narrative of homesickness and surprise is immediately thrust into the midst of the polyphony of Waterloo station (17). I was tempted to write that Waterloo station is a "cacophony;" I'm sure scholars and critics have. But a cacophony is "a harsh discordant mixture of sounds" and the idea of discordance is largely incorrect for this novel. There are many sounds, but they do not clash. Just like a jazz chord, the unfamiliar combination works; the multiplicity is familiar and perhaps even welcomed. At the dock, some long-time transplants to London come to reconnect with those like themselves (even if they are not greeting specific boat-train passengers). They seem to want to feel the touch of home—"finding out what happening in Trinidad, in Grenada, in Barbados, in Jamaica and Antigua," to "oldtalk" in a vulnerable and playful way and gather important information without drama or a forced separation of the joy from the pain: "what is the latest calypso number, if anybody dead, and so on" (17). This is the polyphony that they are all aware of, that the media seem unable (unwilling) to grapple with.[5] Perhaps this in-group knowledge, the underlying

[5] Selvon writes "the English people believe that everybody who come to the West Indies come from Jamaica" (19). Whether or not this is fully evidenced in the media of the time, hyperbole is a prominent tool of Black storytelling.

multivocity, is what motivates Moses to pretend to be Jamaican and take an interview with a reporter who is both dense and insensitive to be asking "'why are so many Jamaicans immigrating to England?'" to people on the dock as soon as their feet are on dry land (20). Moses makes up a story for the reporter, who "get catch…and hurry off" and he laments not having said something profound and impactful in the moment (20). "[H]e had a lot of things to say," many voices ringing through his head of all he had seen and heard in his ten years in London, but he cannot produce them clearly or in headline-worthy pieces for the white gaze (20).

As the novel continues in its created pidgin, Selvon's Black West Indian characters are referred to and self-refer as "spades," "tests," "fellars," and "boys." A twenty-first century reader would do well to question any inclination to take this novel's naming too seriously. While postcolonial mindsets and feminist readings (the language used to describe women is much more risque)[6] always have their place, I assert that to whatever extent Selvon has a clear or unified point to make, it is not grounded in grand sociopolitical themes like how to become freer or how to thrive in society. To search for those kinds of themes is to find quality evidence, and to find just as much evidence to prove the opposite point. To the same extent that any of the language seems to denigrate[7] any of the novel's subjects, it is through Selvon's displays of complete fluency with English linguistic and literary structures and with the English literary tradition that he breaks those molds apart and sets his denigrated characters free. While it would be absurd to wonder if a novelist (no matter his race and country of origin) had full mastery of the language in which he was writing, Selvon purposely positions his 1950s audience to question how much Moses and the boys (or perhaps West Indian immigrants at large) know and understand. He overlays the British (European) tendency to judge mental acumen with a display of multivocal understanding, wit, and translation practice. Biman Basu calls Selvon's novel an "aesthetic exercise" (77), and it is successful in capturing the modes and markers of Black storytelling.

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[6] Women are referred to as "skin," "craft," "cat," and even "pussy." Biman Basu discusses the underpinnings thoroughly.

[7] Interesting that the English language used a root meaning "black" to create a negative word supposedly devoid of racial signifying.

Is We Speaking Good Black English?[8]

If one is inclined to wonder to what end Selvon fabricated a language system, Nick Bentley's theories about it are thorough. He pays due attention to Selvon's "use of Creolized linguistic forms," but he attends too heavily to attempts at "understanding" and contextualizing it (68). Bentley's premise is that "it is important…to consider Selvon in relation to…specific literary forms and the ideological assumptions those forms carried with them, especially in the 1950s" (68). He asserts that *The Lonely Londoners* is more of a realist novel.[9] Bentley claims "Selvon's use of modernist techniques problematizes" Lukacs's argument that the modern character is "'solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings'" (71). Bentley widens Lukacs's idea of alienation from Moses—who is the center of a vibrant community—to encompass the archetype of "the Caribbean immigrant in London" such that Selvon's use of stream of consciousness "represents a black working-class character" (71). I wonder: why make this leap, when it seems more reasonable to concede that Selvon's novel does not fall neatly into the modernist or realist classification?[10] To turn a novel where the many, the multiple, are foregrounded and smash all of their voices into one man's voice seems to be another form of objectification couched in metacognitive theory. I am inclined to think Selvon's motive—if he had one—was not so cerebral. Clement H. Wyke's work probably deserved more attention from Bentley to underpin the assertion that Selvon's language is "liberating and ultimately empowering" and speaks directly to communities of Black readers.[11] This idea that dialect empowers flows perfectly into Lorde's assertion that (Black) people's "[d]ifference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (1). The modern asocial archetype is a tool of the

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[8] John McWhorter popularized for me the term Black English. I refused to title this section with the most quotable linguistic lines from Selvon's novel" "Talk good English!" and "Is English We Speaking?" I created a mashup instead.
[9] To contrast with Gilroy's idea of modernism or any idea of the postmodern.
[10] I made a list of notes about each classification—modern, postmodern, realist, etc.—and *The Lonely Londoners* fits partially into each category and wholly into none. No need to force a square peg into a round hole.
[11] Page 47. "Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy" 1991.

(white) literary master. It is not what Selvon is using in a neatly and rule-bound way to dismantle the master's house.

While I disagree with Bentley's first assessment of the effect of Selvon's language (to show character isolation), he acknowledges the only takeaway that matters: "it produces, through the accumulation of disparate narratives, a collective narration" (73). As the plural title suggests, the novel is not about Moses, but about all of its Black characters who "simultaneously reject the cultural centrality of Englishness and proclaim the validity of marginalized voices within the privileged site of the novel form" (73). To a Black consumer and analyst of Black literature in all of its forms (novels, short stories, nonfiction, poetry, music and hip hop specifically), it seems only natural that an author telling a story about Black people, in a Black voice per se, would use a Black vernacular to do so. In his book, John McWhorter writes that the entire premise of Black vernacular speech (and, in fact, vernacular speech of all people groups regardless of race) is the rule and not the exception.[12] The notion that writing a text in non-standard English is divergent from normal in a way that must mean something is both narrow-minded and unnecessarily metacognitive. Basu gives thorough explanations of many of Selvon's words in his essay and discusses the ways in which Selvon's "'linguistic achievement' and 'modified dialect'"[13] made his narrative more accessible to an English reader. Herein lies another linguistic mix-up. Did Selvon want to appeal to English, or white British, readers (for most of the novel he uses the word "English" where a current writer would likely use "white") or to all speakers of English across the diaspora regardless of race? My reading is one that prefers the latter and draws on the unifying aspects of creolized language.

Aside from unfamiliar terms, the language of Selvon's novel, including the shifting point of view and the way the sjuzhet[14] nearly overshadows the fabula, is not a shock or a departure. It is the written

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[12] "In Haiti, the language of print, school, and the media is French, but when speaking outside of formal settings, people use another form of speech: Haitian Creole" (11). McWhorter goes on to specifically name Sicily where they informally speak Sicilian and Switzerland where they informally speak Swiss German, before noting the unfairness and lack of logic wrapped up in viewing Black English with disdain.

[13] Ramchand, Kenneth. "An Introduction to This Novel." 2009.

[14] I learned these terms from David Wittenberg who largely asserts that adherence to a fabula is a fabrication and that in stories, as in life, all is sjuzhet. In the context of a narrative, the fabula is what

version of a spoken narrative structure with which Black people are familiar. For the novel's first several pages, it seems to clearly have a limited third person narrator with the story viewed through Moses's lens. Selvon also begins on the first page disrupting the natural flow of traditional narrative, of a tight story arc—beginning, middle, end—and interspersing Moses's memories and semi-relevant flashbacks. Another important distinction is the novel's heavy reliance on largely unsignaled sjuzhet, departures from the narrative timeline. The novel includes more and more examples of "oldtalking" and of what seem to be tall tales interwoven into narrative frame. These stories within stories are yet another aspect of the novel's multivocity. Grammatically, Selvon leans on the construction "it had" from the first page and throughout, rarely making it unarguably clear to whom or what "it" is the referent and rarely when "had" is the standard conjunction of "to be." Perhaps there is something herein detailing that these stories are not time bound. McWhorter explains some of the journey Black English has taken. The speech of the "earliest…twentieth century…would sound to our modern ears like weird hybrids of Caribbean and Celtic people" (132). He states outright: "West Indian speech influenced the formation of black English" because "[t]he first slaves brought to Charleston…had formerly worked in Barbados and would have spoken" what "became Gullah Creole" (132-133). Whether or not Selvon considers himself a linguist, to have traveled or emigrated and to write authentically in the voices of the Black Atlantic is to understand words in a diasporic way. Despite McWhorter writing about Black English in the United States, even he makes it obvious why readers and critics like myself are ushered into Selvon's linguistic world with almost ease. The "it hads" place the initiated right in the "narrative tense" where "the use of had did not signal a coming finale—it was telling the story itself" (McWhorter 43).[15]

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chronologically happened, and the sjuzhet is how you tell it, including the insertion and deletion of blocks of time for readability. These terms were used to discuss time travel and other speculative fiction, but, a) it could be argued that Selvon's novel is speculative, and b) the digression from traditional narrative is a natural marker of oral storytelling. "NOTES." *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 237.

[15] These two pages in McWhorter's book are worth finding and reading in full.

Community Past, Present, and Future

Neither Selvon's literary structures nor his characterizations lead to clear archetypes recognized in the West. However, there are some loose considerations to be made about two particular contrasting leadership roles. Moses is introduced on the novel's first page and is the only candidate for a protagonist. The novel is structured to immediately present as if it conjoins his perspective with its own, or even with the author's. Any attempt at finding themes might base itself on Moses's supposed opinions. But a 21st century reader would likely object to as many of Moses's opinions as they would find progressive for his time and do as I did: throw up their hands and abandon a search for the novel's consistent, coherent themes. What a reader can conclude about Moses is that he takes care of the young, semi-attached men in the West Indian community. He may do so begrudgingly and he may not lead them in a way that a 21st century reader would approve of, but he is serious about his role as appointed elder. Every aspect of the job is considered. For example, while recommending housing, "like a welfare officer Moses scattering the boys around London, for he don't want no concentrated area in the Water" (12). He has biases and cuts corners to make the circumstances fit his series of agendas, but he feels obligated to follow the task through, regardless.

Moses's position in the group had been established prior to the start of the novel. When he went to greet his new ward, Henry "Sir Galahad" Oliver, Selvon introduced what could be interpreted as a foil. Tolroy is waiting for his mother to join him from Jamaica. Tolroy is expecting only his mother, but she arrives with five more family members in tow, including the elderly aunt or colloquial "tanty" Bessy. Understandably, Tolroy is surprised and nervous because he has already expressed to Moses that he is concerned about finding space for his mother to live with him (13). It will be much harder to house the family of seven. Moses reminisces on how, when Tolroy first arrived in England, "'I help you to get a job in the factory, and how you have so much money save and I ain't have a cent'" (13). Selvon begins playing a narrative game with the reader. Because it serves the novel's fabula to attend to the ways in which Moses lacked the will to stand up to the man or "test hustling tenants" (14) who just arrived, a trained reader is inclined to understand pages 15 and 16 about Tolroy's family drama as little more than a

humorous tangent. Perhaps it foreshadows a conflict for Tolroy, or a theme about Jamaican or West Indian immigration. It would not obviously apply to Moses as he was placed off page, and it seems to be a small-scale family issue rather than a larger conflict.

Underneath the layers in the conflict, however, is a shifting power dynamic. Tolroy asks his mother, a woman he would have been duty bound to show deference to back home, and is pressured to defer to again once she arrives in England, "'what is this at all?...what Tanty Bessy doing here…and Agnes and Lewis and the two children?'" (15). She responds that the report of higher wages in England made Lewis want to come and work the way Tolroy had (15). Lewis's decision is what causes the ripple of his wife, Agnes, who "'say she not staying at home alone with the children'" and Tanty because it "'is a shame to leave she alone to dead in Kingston with nobody to look after she'" (15). The misdirection in the ensuing conflict is that anyone can logically understand the issue that comes with housing seven people. Presumably Lewis could work for his own family, but the provision of Ma falls to Tolroy and the provision of Tanty Bessy as well, unless Lewis is very successful and can share the load (though he likely will not be expected to, because he has three already under his care). Tolroy laments aloud, and the narration sides with him. In response, Ma and Tanty Bessy bring the guilt. Tanty rubber stamps a prediction from a past conversation, "'you see what I tell you?...how ungrateful he is?'" (15). Ma intervenes with: "'you used to live at Tanty and she used to mind you and send you to school and give you tea and bake in the evening…give you shoes to wear and pants to put on your backside'" (15). From here Tolroy has no recourse. He cannot advocate for leaving Tanty to dead alone in Kingston, even though she falsely claims she will get right back on the boat-train and return. In the following comical exchange between Tanty and a reporter, the elderly lady, feeling successful after having gained some ground, tells a bit of her immigrant story despite the objections of her nephew. She has arrived and has argued her way into the authoritative role of elder she had always carried with her in that family unit. Tanty reestablishes her position in London without deference for the person and social system Tolroy has given social authority since separating from the family.

When the entirety of the novel is considered, perhaps Moses is not an elder and protector of West Indians in London in general, but only of the single men. His actions do not make his motives seem magnanimous because "While all this confusion happening Moses was killing himself with laugh" (16). This explains his antifeminist language and the seeming conflicting interests of wanting his community to avoid negative attention while participating in behaviors that many deem inappropriate and dangerous. But the danger of the behavior (which will be discussed in a later section) is its threat to tradition and familial sensibilities. If Moses is a perpetual bachelor living for the rights of Black male bachelors in London, then he is doing only his own job as well as he can.[16]

Later in the novel, from pages 39-43[17] and 46-49, the narration focuses more in-depth on Tolroy's family, especially Tanty. In this section are many voices, which include Tolroy's resentment of Tanty's freedom of speech and behavior in England as she behaves just as she had in Jamaica. In one anecdote, Tanty chastises Lewis for mistreating his wife, Agnes, and protects her from him when she runs away. The narration intersperses hyperbolic dark humor: Lewis is so nervous about what might happen in his abusive marital arrangement that he "start to bite his finger nails, and he bite them so low that never had a finger nail again" (41). Because of the holes in the narrative, the full blame for Lewis's and Agnes's woes cannot be placed on Moses, but he is a factor. He encourages Lewis's fears of infidelity because "anything you tell him he would believe…So Moses give him a basket for so" (39). And when Lewis has doubts and goes to the older man for help and clarity, Moses gives himself an out with: "My mouth ain't no Bible" (40). This part of Lewis's story ends with Agnes leaving for good, requiring Lewis to go "by Moses to learn how to live bachelor" (41), perhaps a resolution that serves Moses's goal. Selvon tells the end of the Lewis-Agnes debacle and places Lewis off-page with Moses before he refocuses on Tolroy and

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[16] As Biman Basu and I will discuss in later pages: it does not matter to Moses and the characters if part of the strategy is prostitution. That behavior is only "bad" in the eyes of certain religions and in front of women and children.

[17] From pages 43-45, the literal words on the page tighten. There are only 6 paragraph breaks and no dialogue. There are no character names mentioned, even Moses, but the at-that-point omniscient third person narrator gives a short treatise on the intricacies of class boundaries across London. After, there is a description of a small business in Harrow Road before Tanty comes back to center.

Tanty, still at odds. Where Lewis has chosen his leader, Tolroy seems still caught between. He asks Tanty to intervene for the couple on Lewis's behalf. She takes her firm, refusing stance and adds: "Why you don't tell him yourself? You fraid him?" (42).

In another anecdote, or perhaps a tall tale, Tanty's mildly inconvenient but humorous oldtalk on Harrow Road causes slowdowns for businesses by holding up the queues. Even so, Selvon writes, "It was Tanty who cause the shop-keeper to give people credit" (46). The way Selvon tells it, the practice had completely died out until Tanty's voice revived it. Perhaps she does this partially by calling the system "trust" instead of "credit" (46). She advocates for what she wants and for what she feels is best so "Everybody in the village get to know Tanty so well that she doing as she like" (47). Selvon lists half a dozen examples of how she is able to argue her way into something she wants, even if others aren't able to do the same. Tanty is the only female figure throughout the narrative with agency. She asserts herself, tells stories and makes philosophical claims just like Moses and the rest of the boys. She does not confine herself to the home and demands to be understood by the white English populace as well.

Herein Selvon displays the discordance between old and young, between men and women, and between Black and white. It is only the elder Tanty who "grumbles" about the interrelationships of the Black West Indian men with "'White girls! Go on! They will catch up with you in this country!'" (42). I interpret this discordance as Tanty and Moses performing an off-page, under the radar, battle for the rule of Tolroy's conscience and that of their close friends. Tanty is portrayed as the archetypal mother, caring for the family, making Tolroy tea in the midst of this argument (42). Selvon gives her an authority common for Black mothers but uncommon for women in the 1950s. Tolroy, who has spent more time with Moses, who presumably does not want to shift from the life of a bachelor, "liming" away his free time with friends, lends his voice to the side of the free and fun youth in London. He takes a countercultural stance that the presence of elders "make life miserable" and Tanty acknowledges the rub: "'I did know that when old age come is so the children would scorn me,' Tanty say, she voice low because she tired raising it…'What else to expect, oh Lord?'" (42). Perhaps acknowledging the musicality of words, even in difficulty, Tolroy says "'I tired hearing that tune'" (42). There is no resolution to this

problem or most of the novel's problems. This section serves to establish Tanty as the only woman who speaks in her own voice at length or who talks back to the "boys" without being bested by them. With Tanty Bessy as the foil to Moses and competitive voice of elder, a cacophony is created between generations. The Black West Indian community feels obligated to hear Tanty out, protect her, and accommodate her. But she represents a world and a home they have left behind, and so they also resent her ideologies and her methods.

Conversely, a late character introduced to the throng of voices is Harris, whose antagonism with another lesser known member of group known as Five Past Twelve seems like a last-minute addition to an already crowded cast. But, with his language, Harris consistently and condescendingly displays Selvon's verbal agility and the ease with which he switches registers and proves his knowledge of all of London's inner workings. Harris's and Five's introductions come toward the end of the novel when Selvon has already established Moses's role in the lives of the boys, including one nicknamed Big City, whose dark humor executed on Galahad ends in full argument and the threat of violence.[18] Harris's only purpose in the world of the text seems to be to represent what the narration repeatedly called the "ladeda." His profession was to throw parties —fetes —and in one series of pages, the reader meets almost the entire cast of characters at one such fete. Selvon establishes that Harris, a fellow Jamaican, has distanced himself socially from the boys in order to hobknob with elite white London: "greeting all English people with pleasant good evening and how do you do, and a not so pleasant greeting for the boys, for if is one thing he fraid is that the boys make rab and turn the dance into a brawl" (67). Then, for reasons left unstated, beyond the repeated attention on Harris's arrogant attitudes and allegiances to English (white)

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[18] Big City is a Trinidadian who is in fact not fluent in English but who still has a lot to say about pronunciation and syntax. The boys pause in their sexual escapades and have the briefest political discussion (58). Galahad attempts to tell "'[t]he truth about this whole question'" of the color bar; Big City heckles him with "'Talk good English,'" and Galahad cannot finish his speech (59-60). Just like the first time this is said to him, Galahad ought to be frustrated at the interjection because, at that moment, he has shifted into nearly Standard casual grammar. Big City is the one who argues things like the correct word being "fusic" not music. Galahad and City have ongoing tension, resolved by Galahad letting it go so he won't be beaten by the other man who outweighs him greatly. This is the tension that preludes the scene at Harris's fete.

society, “Five does make it his business to pick on Harris because he so ladeda” (67). Here the multivocity, the polyphony, shifts again to cacophony as all of the novel’s voices cram into a gathering hall — and Five embarrasses Harris on purpose, and Tanty does so by accident.

If all the boys are present, Moses is too. As we learn from the situation with Lewis, Moses enjoys inserting himself in a way that could heighten the drama. “Like Marble Arch in the summer, any of Harris fete is a get-together of all the boys…and Moses as usual like a minor master of ceremonies…giving them all the latest lowdown and ballad as they coast a drink” (69). It is Moses who leads the boys in a critique of Tolroy’s bringing his mother and Tanty to the fete, even though all would have known trying to prevent Tanty was futile (69). Tanty Bessy does there what she does everywhere else: argues for her way. She wants to dance with Harris who wants to dance with one of his invited guests but who also wants to avoid an argument and a scene (70). After some back and forth, Tanty gives her closing argument, “‘you know what they playing? “Fan Me Saga Boy Fan Me”, that is my favorite calypso. These English girls don’t know how to dance calypso, man,’” and physically disengages Harris from the other to dance with him (70).[19] While Harris is occupied, it is Moses who bets Five he won’t dance with the abandoned high-society woman (70). Once he does, and once Harris “manage to get loose from Tanty,” it is to Moses he complains, “‘The next time I have a fete, attendance will be by invitation only. You boys always make a disgrace of yourselves, and make me ashamed of myself,’” in perfect standard English diction (71).[20] Despite “nearly everybody dancing, only the old Moses stand up in the corner with Galahad” lecturing and instructing as he has done throughout the novel (71). Of course he does not hesitate to “join the jockeying” when Galahad bets Big City he will not ask the other distinguished female guest to dance (71).

[19] A real calypso song, not made up for the book.

[20] “Man when Harris start to spout English for you, you realise that you don’t really know the language” (67). And further down the page: “‘Listen man,’ Harris plead with Five, ‘I just want you to make an effort to behave and comport yourself properly tonight. I have a distinguished gentleman and his wife here tonight. Try to get on decently just for once.’ But nothing could rouse Five more than to approach him like this” (67).

The scene does not close with the end of the fete, but with Harris's instructions to all the boys on how to behave and how not to embarrass him. The narration makes sure to establish that Harris doesn't drink but has Five serve as the reminder that he used to back in "'them days in Port of Spain'" (74).[21] During the instructions, Harris "[forget] to speak proper English for a minute" and he "went away before Five could finish stirring up the memories" (74). A complex dialectic of interaction and interdependence can be assessed when Harris is juxtaposed to Moses specifically, when Tanty's presence at the fete is analyzed deeply rather than only appreciated for its humor, and when the foundation of difference between Moses's perspective and Tanty's has been established. Harris, like Galahad and the others, trusts Moses and participates in the system Moses creates as long as it does not adversely affect the image he has created of himself. He will not drink or be known for picking up women, but he will join the weekly meeting the elder allows "[n]early every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys liming in Moses room, coming together" (84). Harris will not speak the pidgin; "he like English customs and thing," (66) and he dresses with a "bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm" (67). But, with everyone else, he comes to Moses's "every Sunday…like if is confession" (84).

As Lorde states, the differences among the single and semi-single West Indian men living in London creates a need for them to lean on each other. It is interesting that they, with their language if not their actions, create distance between themselves and Black women. Lorde's argument is for and about Black women's voices more specifically than the Black community at large. I have adapted it here because I believe her premise carries weight applied to the larger context of the way we all speak, not just the way we rally around our gender. If a reader chooses to look at this novel and see a disdain for Black women, Black family structure, and Black homes, there is evidence for that disdain. But my takeaway from this novel is Selvon's multilayered mastery of the English literary tradition exemplified in Harris and Galahad, picked apart by the narrator, by Moses, by Five, remixed and remastered as Black Caribbean 1950s pidgin. Despite the seeming villainization of the woman who just wants to see all of her

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[21] When Five mentions this on page 68, as well, Harris tells him not to talk so loudly.

boys succeed, I see a narrative that would not dare exist without the voice of one Black woman who does what she has to. Tanty fights valiantly, but Moses takes the role of elder, and perhaps rejects the morals all of the men would have grown up accepting. Despite the disrespect aimed at Tanty Bessy —"Tolroy want to send Ma and Tanty back to Jamaica (them two old bitches, I don't know why they don't dead)" (85) —and the dismissal of her advice, the boldness of her voice brings the timbre of matriarchal wit from the Caribbean to Harrow Road. Through Moses's ears and Selvon's pen, the voice of the mother in the language heard from youth resonates from Harrow Road throughout England to the rest of the diaspora. While *The Lonely Londoners* is by no means a shining beacon of perfect communal support, it takes the European "master's" tool of language used to "divide and conquer" (Lorde 2) and unifies all descendants of Britain's colonies under a language of our own making. This problematic group of men is not the dismantling end Lorde seems to desire, but it is a step in that direction, and history shows that the Tantys of the diaspora consistently retain their voices.

Djelis, Tall Tales, and Other Narratives for Aesthetic

It is from a place of in-group rhetorical comfort and familiarity that the Black diasporic reader has more unfettered access to Selvon's linguistic games: tall tales, hyperbole, and oldtalking. This idea of having and respecting elders brings to mind other Black and African cultural concepts like the presence of a djeli in the community. The more common word for djeli is griot, and both French words are a translation of a West African word, jeli, that varies by spelling and pronunciation as it varies by country. Britannica explains that a djeli is a "troubadour-historian," a "profession" handed down through generations, specifically by heredity. Additionally, "The griots' role has traditionally been to preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people." An article on the Met Museum's website adds that djelis are poets and musicians whose "legendary tales are shared and passed down through different forms of expression. While some famous tales are written down, spoken word is the most well-known way to tell these kinds of stories." A blogger, Vamba Sherif, who descends from the Mande of West Africa defines djeli not only the way a prolific author titled his book, "The Guardians of

the Word," but as "it should be: those who know the origin of the word or who know the first word."[22] In looking at all of the varied ways Selvon expresses himself or expresses Black life and culture, I thought about the concept of a djeli, a "history keeper" as Sherif calls them, one whose job it is to tell the stories. I considered that a djeli has all of the tools of aesthetics at their fingertips, but their motivation to craft the histories in a way that persuades is dependent on a variety of factors. While I have no evidence that the truest form of a djeli exists in postcolonial times away from the countries of origin, I hope the djelis of old will forgive current storytellers and history keepers the desire to rise to the office despite our heredity. If Selvon's motive was like that of the djelis, or if he makes Moses into a pseudo-djeli, then his point in the multivocity is to portray as many people, perspectives, voices, and tones as possible, weaving them into the symphony of the Black diaspora story.

Just a few of the tangential but too-interesting-to-ignore ways Selvon and Moses combine as djeli are as follows. The section previously discussed employs a noticeably denser text structure than the section before, with more continuous narration and few breaks for dialogue. It also contains another example of the foregrounding of sjuzhet. In that segment, the story inside the story also contains the music. Selvon explains "It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the spades" and begins to characterize "these old geezers who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost" (44). The story morphs into that of a fictionalized, pluralized representative "old test who singing" on the street "in a high falsetto" with "[n]o song or rhythm, just a sort of musical noise so nobody could say that he begging" (44). He is overheard by a fictionalized, pluralized representative upper class woman who inexplicably throws money down from her window to him: "Could be…she thinking about life and the sound of that voice quavering in the cold outside touch the old heart" (44). After this interlude, the narration spaces out again, returns to giving small insight into the home of Tanty and Tolroy, and tells the tall tale style narrative of how she reintroduces the credit system to Working Class London (46).

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[22] Emphasis mine. Sherif is critiquing Camara Laye who wrote "guardians of the word" as "a free translation of the Mande phrase, Kouma Lafolo Kouma." The alternate translation by Sherif was couched with the claim: "In my own translation -Mandé is my mother tongue-"

Toward the end of the novel, the story diverts to a season "when it look like the vengeance of Moko fall on all the boys in London" and poverty and cold threaten their lives: "nobody can't get any work, fellars who had work losing it" (74). The narration returns to its dark humor as Galahad (74-76) and Cap (81-83) attempt to catch and eat pigeons or seagulls to stave off starvation. The mood in the second record is less of humor and more of suspense. Selvon sets the novel up for its first major tragedy and then does not deliver. Selvon does not tell when Cap finds his next meal —although he catches no seagulls — but Galahad takes his pigeon to Moses's house to share and they end up oldtalking again: two tall tales within the sjuzhet. Moses asks, "'you used to know a fellar name Brackley in Charlotte Street?'" and Galahad responds that one cannot live in Port of Spain and "'don't know Brackley'" (77). They laugh about "'the time Brackley sleep with a whore'" and "'the time they nail Brackley to the cross'" (77). But it is these memories that lead Moses to begin "'talking serious'" about the state of the men's lives in London: "'winter to winter, summer to summer, work after work. Sleep, eat, hustle pussy, work" (78). He begins to wonder why he never saved enough to return to Trinidad.

The novel's lack of plot and system of collected vignettes mirror the verbal storytelling of the original djelis. Selvon critics I sampled seem to focus on the moral fiber of the characters or on the pages I critique in the following section almost exclusively in their articles. Bentley and Basu were the only ones I read who seem to approach the novel holistically and from the stance of language appreciation and artistry. Basu provides a lovely foundation from which I could build a current aesthetic argument focused on the literary art. It is as if the text serves as Moses's verbal rough draft of the story he may write later. The paragraphs before the end of the novel display Moses's need to finally find some meaning where he had not previously. He sees there may be a convenient outlet: "Daniel was telling him how over in France all kinds of fellars writing books what turn out to be best-sellers. Taxi-driver, porter, road-sweeper" so he begins "wondering if he could ever write a book like that, what everybody would buy" (86). This could be interpreted as a self-centered reference for Selvon or as a desire to elevate quotidian Black multivocity. Moses struggles throughout his first telling of their story to decide how much of each character to put in and how much of his own perspective. He is uncertain, perhaps due to his long physical and cultural

removal from Black cultures, which literary devices will be most engaging and impactful. He wants to tell it all and flounders a bit in his first attempt. The weight of caretaker, the responsibility of people's lives and morality "bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening —what? He don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart" (86). There is an interesting balance between the novel's lamentations of everyday life's ups and downs to the pleasures that make the men want to stay in England.

Sex and the Pastoral

The next major narrative shift includes two very different embedded sequences, different in tone, in language, and in content. Biman Basu explains it as Selvon "Shifting from a linguistic to an affective register" (79). Basu then begins explaining his very thorough and interesting assertion that "affect, specifically queer affect, emerges in [this section with] a textual coherence, [which] unfolds as a 'progression' on both linguistic and libidinal registers" (79). Basu's article brings into clarity many questions I had when first analyzing this part of the novel. He asserts, "The effort here is not to discover a narrator's consciousness or the characters' motivation," the text is "an enactment of a vernacular idiom and queer performance" (79). I agree with Basu's point about idiomatic performance but contend a little with the assertions of what the effort is not.

First, in a shift from an unnamed or omniscient narrator to Oliver aka Sir Galahad's point of view, Selvon begins one of two long passages about summer romances and sex in London that almost read like very repetitive pastoral poetry. Herein, like in the section about Harris's fete, Selvon displays his artistry, his ability to move between linguistic registers in English, and his playfulness, or even taunting, of British respectability. Before the admirational treatment of England's parks and outdoor spaces in the summertime, the characters' tangential motivations are named: "that is life for you…To meet a craft there, and take she out some place" (50). It is revealed that the new-to-London Galahad takes quickly and enthusiastically to this pastime. From his first step off the boat train, we see Galahad is very fastidious about his clothing and appearance, but this section has the fact detailed over two pages, including him "concentrating on the physiognomy…touching the hair like a tonsorial specialist" (51) before heading to

his date location “cool as a lord” (51). The narration acknowledges another small business in explanation of Galahad’s vestial sophistication: “Galahad tailor is a fellar in the Charing Cross Road that Moses put him onto and the tailor surprise that Galahad knew all the smartest and latest cut” (51). The lengthy description of clothing and appearance related matters add to the aesthetics of the ensuing scenes. The use of physical and natural beauty and the pastoral may even serve to misdirect from the content.

The narration uses a teasing tone to discuss how, for Galahad, “to say ‘I was in Oxford Street’ have more prestige than if he just say ‘I was up the road’” (49). Also “just to say ‘Charing Cross’ have a lot of romance in it…he feel like a new man” (49). But Selvon is also teasing the reader, because between those two jests at Oliver, he writes “once he had a date with a frauline” as if to use the German frauline is not the same obvious pull for attention on his own heteroglossia. Selvon takes us on a linguistic rollercoaster where the magnitude of different women and the frequency of words like “skin,” “craft,” and “cat” are juxtaposed to the long section describing how Galahad likes to use the city’s fanciest names (49). To further drive the elevated tone of largess and self-import, page 53 twice refers to Henry Oliver as “Galahad Esquire.” And, as if the djeli was singing a story-song about Sundays in summer, he throws in “— lord oh lord —” after the first reference and “Oh Lord” again after the second (53). Each verse of this London lust song includes multiple references to outdoor scenery that become a series of refrains like: “the grass green, the sky blue, sun shining, flowers growing, the fountains sprouting water” (53).

Galahad’s fancy attire does not completely cover for his problematic way of approaching his date with Daisy. These behaviors, like the novel’s language, are countercultural in polite European society,[23] but the boys are “feeling too good to bother about the loud tones in them people eyes” (53). Here again is the multivocity, as Galahad meets the boys “liming” around the Arch and “This was something he uses to dream about in Trinidad…Frank tell him: ‘Boy, it have bags of white pussy in London, and you will eat till you tired’” (53-54). The tone mixes brashness and suspense as Galad worries “...if the date end in fiasco” as in without sex because “he know the boys would never finish giving him tone for spending all

[23] Not that they didn’t participate in the casual sex and prostitution —Selvon said they very actively participated —but they did so in secret.

that money and not eating" where "eat" is a euphemism for some form of coitus (54). Luckily for Galahad, he is convincing enough, and he brags about his escapade to Moses and "give a lot of detail, though all of that is nothing to a old veteran like Moses" (55).

Basu delves deeply into Selvon's language, which he calls "the grammar of desire," while also explaining thoroughly the "bourgeois morality" of the period in which the author wrote (77). By the era's standards, the section is easy to take offense to, but I wonder what would happen if we collectively ceased to try to situate this novel in history (beyond the facts and dates of the Windrush generation) and read it in the twenty-first century with our attendant understandings of holistic humanity rather than a default to positioning the European bourgeois as normative. One of Basu's core arguments is that a queer reading of the text nullifies the need to overanalyze the role of the patriarchy in most if not all of its colonial subjects in the West (82). He addresses the wide space where language and sex coincide. He points out one of the novel's very few symbols: "The women embody the achievements of white civilization, and however inaccurate the embodiment may be, the symbol is not tarnished by the inaccuracies — at least for some men and at least for some time" (80).[24]

Perhaps as another function of the djeli-in-training, Basu points out "we have a significant interruption in the syntax of summery celebration, a Fanonesque moment" which actually reads almost as an exact copy of a section in Black Skin, White Masks (82).[25] The incident of racial discomfort is to "Galahad like duck back when rain fall —everything running off" (52). The narrator writes "it used to

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[24] "Most middle-class readers have difficulty with the idea of sex as episodic and transactional, and this is because of a deeply coercive, discursive regime of normativity." He also writes Laura Kipnis "does not break down the distinction between art and pornography, as the 'pornographic response is still viscerally and experientially distinct from the aesthetic response.' Nevertheless, she recognizes that the 'categorical distinctions between art and pornography come down to issues of sublimation, including the class imperatives to produce it' (85)."

[25] Basu's note: "Frantz Fanon's words, in translation, are "'Look, a Negro!'" (109). This representation has been replicated, sometimes in a slightly modified form. Barbara Ehrenreich, for example, recalls Audre Lorde's experience while Lorde is shopping with her "daughter in a shopping cart": a "little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid'" (92). And in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, the protagonist, Sissie, walking the streets of Frankfurt, is confronted by a woman "telling a young girl who must have been her daughter: 'Ja, das Schwartze Madchen'," which Sissie understands "meant 'black girl'" (12).

have times" when Galahad thought about all the implications, but when he was out on dates it would not bother him (52). Here it is especially evident that the text is structured generally to mirror a person, a djeli, telling a long story. He tells it as he remembers it, with regular interruptions of details and sidebars that he feels will add to the story. In these pages, the narrator seems to want to tell generally about the experiences of the Caribbean men in their free time. As is logical, the shadow of racism casts itself over the reverie and interrupts the stream of consciousness. The narrator couches his own wondering in Galahad's sjuzhet, a brief pause to speculate about eugenics and race relations before "all thought like that out of Galahad mind" (53). The entire novel is like this, structured to lose the reader in linguistic gymnastics such that they, like Galahad, do not stop for a long time to lament racism or the racialization of language. The effects of colonization surround them at every moment but the novel only acknowledges its presence. It does not grapple with intentions, make firm statements, or propose potential solutions.

After Galahad's experiences in the outdoors and Daisy's body, pages 58 and 59 repeat the summer poem introduction: "On any Sunday in the summer, in the sweet, lazy summer when them days like they would never done." The setting is reestablished, and the men's clothing and women's lack of clothing remix as if to remind the reader of the topic. In a nine-line run-on sentence that mentions "Sunday" twice and discusses weather seven ways, the reader is signaled away from the short, unresolved political scene that set up a minor conflict between characters (58-59). The narration then shifts into a stream of consciousness: eight pages without punctuation, pause, or break. After more repetition of weather imagery, Moses becomes the focal point and, as Basu points out, the content of the section is sex, folded into the pastoral appreciation of heat and green space: "[I]n the winter, you would never think that the grass would ever come green again but if you don't keep your eyes open it look like one day the trees naked and the next day they have clothes" (61). The narration is structured to lose the reader in Moses's many escapades: "to talk of all the episodes that Moses had with woman in London would take a bag of ballad" (61). The text moves through no less than seven distinct stories, the longest half a page and others no more than seven unpunctuated lines. All of them involve Moses, but some also include other men, Galahad and Cap. To Basu's point about queer performance, at least two of Moses's sexual encounters

appear to be with men. These are given no distinction from the other encounters. The tone of appreciation and amiability for mild temperatures might serve as some form of punctuation where no periods, commas, or exclamation marks are used. After Moses and Cap take turns with a woman, "summer does really be hearts," and the most direct reference to Moses as a prostitute occurs "one splendid summer night with the sky brilliant with stars like in the tropics" (64). With a predictable lack of signaling, Selvon brings this segment to a close: "all these things happen in the blazing summer under the trees in the park on the grass with the daffodils and tulips in full bloom and a sky of blue oh it really does be beautiful" (66). As if closing curtain on a musical with a lyrical refrain in the ballad of sexy summer Sundays "that is life in London oh lord Galahad say when the sweetness of summer get in him" (66).

The group of men's moments of most obvious fun and pleasure are those spent engaging in sexual exploit. Couching these vignettes in pastoral language conveys a tone of peace and control within these activities that does not seem to exist in other places. Personal attitudes about transactional sex determine whether the section's mood remains peaceful and pleasurable or shifts with Moses's reflective "long sigh like a man who live life and see nothing at all in it" (66). Basu claims that despite the attempts to breeze over everything, these men experience a "world…of longing and heartache" that they cannot fully hide behind, "sexualities that transgress bourgeois standards of morality" (77). Perhaps Selvon adds these pages because he knows they will make so many "cork their ears" from shock and disgust (65).[26] In order to thoroughly challenge the perception of the Black being as whole, "At times the sense of humor may be offensive, particularly in its masculinist idiom…Both the language and the sexualities are irreverent, exorbitant, extravagant, self-deprecatory, sad, and masculinist" (77). This may have been a way to give voice to the struggle of being seen as a sex object without making complaint the centerpiece. In a deeper character or sociological study, one ought to consider Basu's point that "Perhaps the affective condition of this diasporic population is caught well in Moses's speculation that 'they only laughing because they fraid to cry'" (77).

[26] The idea that people will be in disbelief of England's sexual proclivities and will "cork their ears" instead of listen is repeated no less than three times in these few pages.

My only point of contention is Basu's statement that "This is not a matter of authorial intention" (79). As a writer and theorist, I cannot fathom the concept that Selvon sat at his typewriter and layered all of this into so few pages without intentionality. That idea undercuts Basu's other assertions of performance and affect. I wonder if the reason so many are uncomfortable with the idea of authorial intention is because it seems to necessitate an easily understandable motivation. Without that need to pathologize the author, the text can stand more firmly on its own feet and be appreciated for the work that made it onto the page. I also assert that a queer reading of this novel makes Lorde even more applicable because the disdain for Black women, for wholesomeness, and for family is a result of master-slave dichotomy Lorde wants to break down.

The layers of my argument culminate in a look at where we were linguistically at the time of the novel's publication, when Selvon needed the "European reader's complicity," and where we are now (Basu 77).[27] Currently scholars like myself can simply study the mastery of aesthetic language Selvon possessed in order to achieve that complicity. Once the complicity was gained, what else did Selvon want to accomplish? I assert that it may have simply been allowance into the cultural history, a seat at the table as djeli alongside the bard and all his historical fiction. Tanty's unwillingness to be silent in a society where her loudness is impolite and is interpreted as a lack of intelligence or acculturation is the same insistence that helped all Working Class people of Harrow Road to be trusted again with the credit system at that shop. It is also this "loud tone" that pulls Tolroy in opposite directions between his home culture and the queer adventures of Moses and London summer. Harris's verbal prostration before white, affluent London society is the same ocean of pleasure and acceptance into which Galahad dives with his attempts at code switching and impressive suits. Although still an infant on the language journey, Big City is nicknamed such because he knows he wants to see the whole world's most popular places, a desire common to West Indian immigrants realizing that London is not the only important locale in the world.

[27] Basu (and his sources) asserts the created pidgin was for the purpose of gaining complicity, making accessible.

The same way Chude-Sokei points out Paul Gilroy's "aesthetic leveling of topics" and how it becomes "an argument against the false high/low dichotomy" of critical theories, that is the way Selvon treats topics in his novel: the difficult political topics are discussed in conjunction with sex and parties and all in an irreverent tone (742). Regardless of which era the academy attempts to shove this novel into or Basu's assertion of "a more conventional modernist 'closure,'" it exists outside of the master's house, off of his property, where the community is bidialectical and that dialectic is the only salvation. Instead of contrasting white civilization with Black "simplicity" or "backwardness," I, like Fanon, choose to "foreground," the "essence," the "source" (127-128). Kimberly F. Hall used her book[28] to prove that original English writers wanted to create separation through the very invention of the rhetoric of race and they did so with their literature. This is pertinent to the entire discourse of Black British writers especially to the extent that they attempt to distance themselves from their birth nationalities and unite under Black Englishness or the Black diaspora. While I would not request the majority of novels be written in pidgin or vernacular, the addition of those into popular circulation normalizes Black creole languages and our multivocity.

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[28] She references the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy as dealing in topics of asserting Black "Englishness" where, she argues, it had been denied from the original popularization of written English language in the early modern era where she situates her research (12).

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Chapter Two

Writing, A Long History of Black Magic

When starting research on the subgenres of science fiction and fantasy written by Black authors, I was quickly confused and temporarily frustrated. When digging into peer-reviewed sources on Afrofuturism, I found plenty of specific examinations of authors Octavia Butler and Nnedi Okorafor, and some on N.K. Jemisin. Interesting articles pulled out trends in their bodies of work. However, in attempting to backtrack to the theories that informed these critiques, I could not find what I was looking for in the way of genre studies. Since I had noticed a surge in African fantasy in bookstores, libraries, and on social media, I went looking for broad information in more popular culture texts. In the online article "Afrofuturism 2.0 - a legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois," one of poco.lit. magazine's editors, Anna von Rath gives a short history of the movements in Afrofuturism that have landed critics in a somewhat complicated place. Rath and Hope Wabuke, assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, both write about the trajectory of the genre. Rath mentions the new anthology *The Comet* named after Du Bois's own story and the change in perceptions of Black speculative fiction from the United States where Du Bois began to Europe where he ended. What poco. lit. does broadly and succinctly (that many speculative critics do not) is note the ways people were engaging with and writing these literatures before Dery put a definition to them.

In the literary critical record, the term Afrofuturism seems to have first been used by Mark Dery in 1993. He writes that it is "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (1). Dery soon became the reference point from which artists and critics made many amendments and counter arguments. While some, including the often-referenced Alondra Nelson, sought to refine the term and develop a literary tradition under that term, others began working on new terms. Nelson wrote prolifically on "conversations about the intersections of speculative fiction, futurism, and African diaspora cultures" because Dery was

too focused on American and European impacts (Thomas 284).[29] Dery's coinage came at the same time as Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy's title tells us he was employing a DuBoisian frame since the origin, or at least popularization, of the idea of double consciousness in the Black collective is from DuBois's book *The Souls of Black Folk*. This took me back to poco.lit.'s discussion of DuBois's writing for and influence over a subgenre that was not critically, academically named until thirty years after his death.

Ytasha L. Womack wrote a book length work on the literature, film, art, and technology wherein she redefines Afrofuturism as "liberation" while also claiming that it is "dedicated to the study of works that analyze dynamics of race and culture specific to the experiences of black people through sci-fi and fantasy works" (9, 23). Womack's book is acknowledged as the first work of its kind, and it leaves room for the next work that will address the complexities of postracial concerns, in the vein of DuBois and Fanon.[30] But it could be argued that, by not explicitly addressing these concerns, Womack did not fully cover her topic. In 2019, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas wrote *The Dark Fantastic* which focused on fantasy fiction written by white authors who had misrepresented Black characters. Thomas's concurrent article focuses on "the black fantastic" written by Black authors (Thomas 285). She brings the conversation back to the most prolific DuBois, Butler, and Okorafor and frames up her theoretical analysis with Gilroy as the foundation. The work Thomas was too early to cite that both Wabuke and another of poco.lit.'s editors, Lucy Gasser, do cite is Okorafor's own theoretical terminology.[31] Okorafor wrote: "Africanfuturism is similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West." Wabuke adds that Africanfuturism differs from Afrofuturism in its divorce from "the white Western gaze" (1). Wabuke also

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[29] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Ytasha L. Womack (18), and Wabuke (1) all cite Nelson.
[30] VanVeen more explicitly expresses disappointment in these blindspots.
[31] Okorafor's October blog post was almost definitely published too late for Thomas who published both of her theories in the same year.

names Okorafor's newest addition to the Black speculative, Africanjujuism. Okorafor writes her definition this way: "Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative."

Wabuke theorizes that "Black speculative fiction" can be the umbrella term that meets all of our needs, "for ease of handling," and that postracial Afrofuturism need not be enemies with Africanfuturism (5). The conversation about Afrofuturism has shifted to one of whether the future is more or less racialized than the present. The concept of postracial or post-black seems to be a fairly U.S. concept as other members of the Black diaspora seem to be less concerned with gaining equality, moving past the need to ask for it, and moving toward preserving of their nation or culture's history. Cultural pride is not waning in literature, and in fact, African and diasporic writers and artists are more likely to produce stories steeped with their country's markers than they were prior to the release of Marvel's Black Panther (Wabuke 2, Thomas).

In looking at the various critiques of Black science fiction, Afrofuturist art, and Black fantasy old and new, I noticed that the broader theories of not only DuBois, but also Frantz Fanon and the newer Gilroy were almost always cited. In Thomas's "Notes Towards a Black Fantastic: Race and the Imagination Gap," she provides us with a partial list of "critical works [that] form an essential new canon for the study of race in contemporary science fiction, fantasy, and horror" (284).[32] Included is Womack's Afrofuturism. Womack also wrote *Post Black* which focuses on the larger debate about Blackness and identity. Thomas uses Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic and cites two other critics who also build on Gilroy's foundation.[33] Thomas engages a complicated interaction with the tensions between past theory of the literary and social affect of slavery and the contemporary arenas of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism.

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[32] This title also mirrors Hoyt Fuller's classic "Towards a Black Aesthetic" and I assume Thomas would be familiar with the work.

[33] Gilroy writes about: "this historical conjunction —the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world" (3).

She seems to imply that even Afrofuturists cannot get out of the collective tragic memory. In another section of the article, Thomas asserts that books are the maps that we use to navigate the space of Gilroy's Black Atlantic (292).[34] The question is not whether American Black authors can shape time and space to answer the questions that the Middle Passage created. The statement is that African authors already have. We have all had access to these books from diasporic perspectives for decades.

The remaining questions concern the new realities of authors who have multiple Black identities and some who have found Blackness to be a limitation. Michael Eric Dyson, a leader in the field of Black studies, wrote the introduction to *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?* that summarized many of these ideas. Dyson warns us that Black people have to define Blackness outside of the "response to oppression" (xiv). He also leads us through the concept of how to transcend the entirety of all of the community's latent traumas related to the white gaze (xiv). Just like Dyson worries that our submission to "the plural pronoun we" (xiv) traps us in "a priori blackness," Black postracial writers and artists have cast off the we, the unity, the collective in fear of its limitations (xv). The book Dyson's essay introduces helps reclaim an expansive "we" that speaks to the literature possibilities of the Black speculative. Dyson assures us that our Blackness can be exhaustive, expansive, enormous (xviii), complex (xiv), malleable (xiii), that we can "be rooted in but not restricted by" it and that we can all "see ourselves in all our luminous, thrilling, complicated, splendid Blackness...when we leave everything to our imagination" (xviii). I wholeheartedly agree with Dyson's discussion of all-encompassing Blackness,[35] but I don't think my agreement with him or even the expansiveness of his argument[36] covers the full breadth of the issue. Instead of a Black Atlantic that represents an enslaved mentality that the community cannot escape, my understanding is that

[34] Much of Thomas's article seems focused on the pathology of our past before we ever get to speculate our present or future. This is thirty years of theoretical groundwork to arrive at a zero point on the graph and be able to understand the negatives and positives.
[35] In this article, not necessarily elsewhere, because not only am I not a Dyson scholar but also he is rumored to be unsympathetic to the idea he claims even in this article. If our Blackness is expansive and exhaustive, it cannot also be elitist. I reserve judgment on the body of his work, but I also cannot align myself with the body of his work, only with this particular article.
[36] See previous note. Dyson is a prolific Black studies scholar and no one person's life work will solve the problem of our long history of being hurt. Dyson himself attests to this in his claim that Blackness is expansive and exhaustive.

we have a little more work to do building an easy-to-cross textual and analytical bridge between Black histories. In her article, Wabuke writes "As conversations…push toward greater nuance and clarity, there is potential for the term 'Black Speculative Literature' to become the language that encompasses Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and Africanjujuism for the ease of handling" (5). She explains that this term could come to mean "literature that centers the lineage and myriad diversity of Black creative thought and culture, a literature deeply rooted in representations from Black perspectives from Africa and the Black diaspora, a literature that aims to imagine Black futures. Black Speculative Literature is science fiction, fantasy, horror, and alternate realities centering Black African and diasporic cultures, mythologies, and philosophies" (5-6).[37] This language, which I will use in this chapter, avoids the opposite limitation of Okorafor's African terms. While they perfectly describe her work, they would not well define mine, for example. Like Okorafor, I am not interested in being defined by terms congruent with the white gaze; however, my Blackness is equally American and Latine and Caribbean. Afrofuturism may be somewhat tainted, but, like Dyson suggests, I will not give all-encompassing Blackness from all over the world away to the colonizing forces. Black literature encompasses the entire diaspora, and the Black speculative lens is about the features of the work, not the origin country of the author. The rest of this chapter will use a poem by Danez Smith, a Black writer, as a theoretical framework for the type of speculative art that will satisfy contemporary audiences. I will apply that theory to Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, a novel that serves as a classical ideal but does not translate fully in current times. I will then apply that theory again to Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds*, a very recent novel that meets almost all of the needs of new audiences.

[37] Wabuke continues in the same paragraph: "It must not center the white Western gaze. However, if we widen the operative "must" to a continuum of degree on a timeline, then Black Speculative Literature has the room to hold Africanfuturism, which is defined by centering the non-Western Black gaze, and also Afrofuturism, which is defined by retaining space for the Western and/or the white gaze." I find this concession unnecessary but I acknowledge that Wabuke sees a potential exclusion of historical texts that I am blind to.

Poetry as Theory

The role of imagination and speculation in the lives of Black people has been emphasized by many cultural critics. The NAACP foregrounded speculative fiction as prescriptive reading for Black children in their magazine *Crisis*, produced during the Civil Rights Movement (Thomas 282). In March 2021,[38] I first read a poem by Danez Smith in their book *Don't Call Us Dead*. The poem is titled "dinosaurs in the hood," and it is an outline for a speculative movie where "Jurassic Park meets Friday meets The Pursuit of Happyness" (2). I wrote in the margin of the poem "Afrofuturism" before I had ever looked up the term or read any articles on the subject. I had decoded that the term involved Black people and future-focused topics, but I had not yet studied to know any common thematic aspects or aesthetic tendencies. With the knowledge I now have of the field, Smith's 2014 poem employs less of a future focus than traditional Afrofuturism, and it incorporates more fantasy and more signifiers of magic. Smith says the movie should have "a scene where a little black boy is playing/ with a toy dinosaur on the bus, then looks out the window/ & sees the T. Rex" (3-5). Using their premise, I have outlined some things Smith says they want from this movie, this piece of Black speculative art. These are several of the same things trends seem to say we as readers, writers, and scholars of Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, Africanjujuism, and any comprehensive Black speculative literatures might be asking for.

Smith writes that "the kid has a plastic Brontosaurus or Triceratops/ & this is his proof of magic or God or Santa" (3-5, 9-10). On initial reading, Smith seems specifically invested in dinosaurs in a way that could seem irrelevant to the conversation the rest of the speculative literature community is having. Dinosaurs are creatures of the past. I would venture, however, that dinosaurs in this poem serve a dual symbolic function. The primary function is as the piece of art or literature's speculative grounding image or concept, or the chosen literary element that makes it different from other texts. In Afrofuturist texts, the speculative grounding image tends to be an element of technology. In fantasy, it is more likely to be a

[38] The course was Poetries of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic and our focal point was specific to the commonalities between that epidemic and the coronavirus/covid-19 pandemic we were still living in. There was speculation going on in our class Zoom meeting every week about the future of socialization and sex and education, as many of the students in the course were classroom teachers, including myself.

person or group with magical abilities or who embody folkloric elements. It is something everyone "knows" is not "real." In this case, for Smith, it is dinosaurs. The secondary symbolic function of this extinct (or mythological) creature as the text's grounding image is equally important. Dinosaurs serve as a symbol of resurrection. The T. Rexes, Brontosauruses, or Triceratopses are equally "proof of magic or God" and the antagonist to humanity that must be defeated. Later on Smith writes, "this movie can't be a metaphor for black people & extinction" (26-27). So, Smith resurrects the dinosaurs and places them in the "hood" where marginalized people are not annihilated by them, but rise up and kill them again. The emphasis placed in line 17 on "real-ass dinosaurs" could mean these ideas are directly, purposely juxtaposed. We all know dinosaurs are extinct, so they become a reverse metaphor symbolic of resurrection. Smith's book of poems centers on the idea of the Black body resurrected. If we restate the dinosaur images as ones of death, resurrection, and transcended life, we create more common ground. So, Smith is asking for stories that prove the unprovable, or where the no-longer-existent exists again. This dual meaning is concealed in the structure of the poem. Before the dinosaurs were a force of threat that the community needed defense against, they were a child's toy, the object of his fascination and imagination. Interpreting the poem as a theoretical prospectus, Smith wants to see that a piece of art or literature's speculative grounding image is thematic proof of the ethereal, or supernatural. And yet there are two sides to every antagonist and villain, so the "magic" and the g/God are characterized as round not flat, and they might need to be tamed.

Secondly, "This movie is about a neighborhood of royal folks -- / children of slaves & immigrants & addicts & exiles – saving their town/ from real-ass dinosaurs" (15-17). They are the protagonists and the nuanced subjects of the art, who have the agency and ingenuity to be the heroes for their community. The implication of the "hood" (and the other other-signifiers discussed in the next section) is that it is filled with people of color.[39] Smith holds a large amount of racial tension in this poem,

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[39] BIPOC is the more popular term at present to use here, meaning Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. But even I use the term for political correctness not because I find it all encompassing. In the sociopolitical arena, there are many times where all of us should be lumped together in order to prove a

because it is obvious in the framing lines that Smith is interested specifically in elevating Black people without that elevation becoming a weapon against others.[40] In Smith's world, Black survival, Black resurrection, and Black heroics are not given or taken on the backs of others, especially not other people of color. As this Black royalty saves itself from the speculative threat (dinosaurs, magic, g/God), the effects of classism and capitalism on Black bodies is also lessened or erased.

The third element of this new product of the speculative involves some Black signifiers that are not at all obvious on the surface. Smith writes: "I want grandmas on the front porch taking out raptors/ with guns they hid in walls & under mattresses/ …I want Cicely Tyson to make a speech, maybe two./ I want Viola Davis to save the city in the last scene with a black fist afro pick/ through the last dinosaur's long, cold-blood neck" (20-24). In other words, elders and mentors protect their community with surprising resourcefulness, using tools and provisions that may have seemed impractical or unnecessary until the unexpected threat of the speculative. Smith wants surprise safety from the figures whose archetypal positioning (on the porch in a rocking chair, or at the side fence speaking with the neighbors) transforms from a passive state to an active one. Lines 20-22 imply a deep reverence for our elders and a society, a "hood," that would never dismiss or displace them. Even in a speculative world, grandmothers are heroes with quick wits and power.

Similarly, Cicely Tyson, an award-winning Black actress in the U.S., passed away at age 96 in 2021. She was featured in television shows and a movie that aired in 2020, working prolifically until shortly before her death, long past when Smith wrote this poem. Smith's line that this idealistic movie must include one or two speeches by Tyson are a reference to her enormous body of work—more than ninety appearances. It is a special nod to Tyson's role in Black cultural hits by writer and director Tyler Perry, one specifically where she in fact gives a speech about unity among kin.[41] Despite the frequency

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point. But in many people's personal experience and work, there are few times when the umbrella category is more useful than the individual identifiers.

[40] Smith writes: "I don't want any racist shit/ about Asian people or overused Latino stereotypes…I don't want some cheesy yet progressive/ Hmong sexy hot dude hero…" (13-14, 17-18).

[41] *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006) and *Why Did I Get Married, Too?* (2010)

with which Black movie goers have heard a Cicely Tyson speech, Smith indicates that there will never be too many. Continuing in the same culturally significant vein, it is important that Viola Davis is the one to "save the city in the last scene" of this new type of perfect speculative movie (23). Although much younger, Davis is on track to have an acting career with similar quantity and quality as Tyson. At the time Smith published this poem, Davis's appearances numbered in the seventies. One of the shows Tyson filmed last was two episodes of the show on which Davis starred for six years.[42] Tyson played Davis's mother there for ten episodes throughout its run. Both actresses appeared in the award-winning *The Help*. At the time of the poem's publication, Davis was not known as much for action roles, so Smith's decision to make her the ideal hero, using an illogical tool to save the hood, is indicative of the way they see the speculative positioned. Davis uses what she has at hand—an afro pick (a comb with less than ten, long, widely spaced teeth meant to work through the naturally tight curls of an afro hair style) whose handle is shaped like the Black power fist popularized by the political activist group the Black Panthers in the 1960s. Smith is genius in the layers of meaning. The comb could have been shaped like anything, or been devoid of a special marker, just a regular comb. But a Viola Davis who can throw a comb hard enough to pierce the scaly hide of a dinosaur would be styled with an iconically Black hairstyle and a symbol of Black pride. Her style and pride as the last of the hood's heroes are also the most magical, the plot twist and successful conquest a movie like this demands.

The perfect piece of new Afrofuturistic art must include the elders, the djelis, imparting wisdom and mentors wielding magic with pride and style. Smith ends the poetic prescription for speculative art as it began: "the little black boy/ on the bus with a toy dinosaur" (34-35). The poet acknowledges that the most important aspect, "the only reason/ I want to make this is for that first scene anyway" because in it, the audience would see a little boy, "eyes wide & endless/ his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there" (35-36). I think Smith wants to see the whole hood's dreams as possible and within reach, and wants communities of "royal folks" to believe in magic or God or Santa again.

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[42] *How to Get Away With Murder*

In Thomas's book, she wrote a critique of young adult fantasy novels by non-Black writers whose "Black girl characters were interpelated in imagined storyworlds as *monstrous*, *invisible*, and *always dying*" (283). In her article she explains herself as "Proposing that Black characters in such stories were trapped in a cycle that I named the *dark fantastic*" (282).[43] This is very similar to the ways in which Smith's requirements for this new movie play out against a practical prescription for speculative literature. These theoretical ideas are complicated by the things Smith says we don't want and by the essential elements of Blackness they delineate in the poem.

> "...But this can't be
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> a black movie. This can't be a black movie. This movie can't be dismissed
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> because of its cast or its audience. This movie can't be a metaphor
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> for black people & extinction. This movie can't be about race.
>
> This movie can't be about black pain or cause black people pain.
>
> This movie can't be about a long history of having a long history with hurt.
>
> This movie can't be about race. Nobody can say nigga in this movie
>
> who can't say it to my face in public. No chicken jokes in this movie.
>
> No bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills
>
> the black boy. & no one kills the black boy..." (24-33)

Smith's repeated lines— "this can't be a black movie" (24-25), "This movie can't be about race" (27, 30), and "& no one kills the black boy" (32-33) —emphasize the most important contingencies. It may be easy to attend to the three conditions explained above, but Smith does not want this new piece of speculative art to be ineffectual for Black audiences in these last three, specifically racialized ways. The movie cannot be stereotypical or canned. It cannot be overly political or confrontational on the topic of race. And

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[43] Both emphases are Thomas's own.

despite the horror and science fiction trope that the Black person always dies first in the movie, no one kills the Black boy.

I was struck by the implied emphasis in the juxtaposition of the above repetitions with a few sentences of differentiated diction and syntax: “This movie can’t be dismissed/ because of its cast or its audience. This movie can’t be a metaphor/ for black people & extinction” (25-27). In earlier lines, Smith writes, “Don’t let the Wayans brothers in this movie” (12-13), and that the movie “is not a vehicle for Will Smith and Sofia Vergara” (19-20). The Wayanses’ (a family of prolific comedic actors) names are juxtaposed to racialized ideas of non-Black people of color, ostensibly because they have more than once been recorded making jokes about other races. Will Smith was mentioned by Womack (8) as well for his frequent appearances in futuristic movies like *Men in Black*, to which lines 18 and 19 are direct references, along with the *Bad Boys* series. Many find Will Smith to be shallow and only famous for cheap laughs. Sofia Vergara is similarly often cast in outlandish comedic roles like that in the sitcom *Modern Family*. Ironically, she has had cameo roles in many “Black” films and shows including two written by Tyler Perry and an episode of a Wayans TV show. There is a level of Black popular culture that Danez Smith seems to find engaging, but they point out the places where humor and ratings go so far that the ideal speculative art would not include it.

The poet includes two lines that many readers will need to reread in order to digest: “This movie can’t be about black pain or cause black people pain./ This movie can’t be about a long history of having a long history with hurt” (28-29). The simplicity in this use of chiasmus is another display of Smith’s genius, knowing that the weight of the words “black,” “pain,” “long history,” and “hurt” layer the meaning in ways more adequate than complicated diction. As a student of this book of poems, I think the line directed against “chicken jokes” is tongue-in-cheek (31). Smith is providing us with comic relief while also making us aware that they are fed up with stereotypes. Smith’s Black speculative art does not need to transcend race altogether. It leans on the all-encompassing Blackness outside the racial imaginary, like Dyson was saying, in order to transcend Black pain. The last two simple but clear directions show

how many of our historical narratives miss the mark of our renewed needs for Black speculative literature: “No bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy” (32-33).

Smith gives us a depiction of the good and bad elements of Black popular culture and ideology that they think would make the perfect “feel good movie.” They also tell us clearly what this movie would not entail. We have to contend, whether we want to or not, with the elephant in the room that Dyson addressed as did Smith. Dyson makes a veiled in-group reference to Malcolm X’s famous rhetorical move: “What do you call a Black man with a PhD? A nigger.” The complexity of our place in the racial imagination is summed up in that word. In the poem, Smith writes, “Nobody can say nigga in this movie/ who can’t say it to my face in public” (30-31). They don’t write that the word is outlawed altogether or that it won’t be featured in the Black speculative futuristic space. Despite pushes by Black intellectuals for decades, especially after the invention of hip hop, the colloquial use of the word did not die out. It carries the same resurrective power that Smith relies on throughout their poem and book. In the perfect piece of Black speculative literature, the painful history of the word nigger is not eliminated through disusage but is reintegrated in a way that meets our current and future needs. It isn't gone but it is Black owned, Black regulated, and Black enforced.

Kindred and The Atlantic Space

Kindred was an early work of Octavia Butler’s, and it remained one of her most popular throughout her lucrative career of writing science fiction and fantasy with Black characters. Even after many more Butler novels that do better to exemplify the needs of the community, *Kindred* remains the most often read and referenced (Wabuke 2).[44] For most, Octavia Butler is considered to be the foundation

[44] Why not just pick different books? The *Parable* books are very postracial and *Fledgling* is fantasy. In any of those I can draw too many parallels to the Atlantic Space I want us to move past. But do not let it be said that I don’t understand: without Butler, we would not have Okorafor, Jemisin, Adeyemi, and Johnson. Also, Wabuke asks us to “Consider the literary genius of Octavia Butler: it was not any of her prior and successive novels which were so thoroughly sunken in the Black American diasporic gaze that made her a national best-selling success, but 1979’s *Kindred*, her book tied closest to the white gaze, that is her best-selling novel. It is *Kindred*, the uncomfortable narrative of legacies of racial violence in America that makes the saving of one’s white rapist ancestor necessary in order to save one’s Black self.

of Black popular Afrofuturistic fiction. She may be critiqued as having been tethered to American Black racial history, no matter how diverse her cast of characters or how forward thinking she was for her era. When searching for Afrofuturist authors, Butler is listed as a front runner, and, when looking at best sellers and the most often reviewed of her works, *Kindred* is listed at the top. This novel is a perfect example of a text that wants to expand out into the speculative but has not returned back across the Black Atlantic space through the Door.[45] *Kindred* is every bit a black book (Smith 25-26) about race (27, 30). The protagonist, a Black woman named Dana, is married to a white man, and the whole novel is framed through the lens of her unstated, internal musings about miscegenation. Each section uses these musings as a 1970s grounding point before the characters time travel to the early 1800s. *Kindred* heavily layers black pain and causes black people empathetic pain (Smith 28). While there are no actual "bullet holes in the heroes" (Smith 32), the first chapter has Dana threatened at gunpoint by Tom Weylin, a slave owner (10). She is whipped multiple times and the reader is witness to the physical abuse, rape, and mutilation of various enslaved people throughout the narrative. The book could even be summarized as being "about a long history of having a long history with hurt" (Smith 29). Even though Dana's husband tells her, "your ancestors survived that era" through "Strength. Endurance" that does little to shift the tone of despair (39).

Kindred is introduced to many readers as a time travel fantasy novel. It stands out, however, from many time travel novels in "the substance of the narrative itself" (Wittenberg 11), the fact that its primary setting is not a fictionalized worldline that causes the reader suspense because of "a constant

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It is *Kindred* that provides the reader's white gaze with Black forgiveness and the absolution of white guilt without holding whiteness culpable for its legacy of violence or demanding accountability and reparations. It was *Kindred* that was then most palatable to the white American audience and championed as Butler's first, and still most visible, mainstream success" (2).

[45] Thomas employs Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* to discuss the tensions between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. She jumps from discussing the research in the field of Afrofuturism to spending a lot of time with Brand on the idea that there is a collective mental place Black Americans cannot recover from, "The Door of No Return." In other words, the collective memory of being traded across an ocean like cattle, being the objects of a new form of slavery, being the recipients of new forms of torture, disconnected us permanently from the origin story of Africa. Thomas asks in her article: "What happens when a fictional character confronts or creates a portal, a doorway to another world? Can time and space be shaped by an author to satisfy needs left unfulfilled by an unjust reality?" (289).

stream of decisions being made both ways:" one in the "real world" and the other in the world to which a protagonist travels (Wittenberg 18). In many ways *Kindred* is a novel about one woman's response to oppression, and the underlying futility that even a magical power like time travel couldn't keep the brunt of the tragedies from occurring. Time travel is *Kindred*'s only speculative element; everything else in the narrative is painfully realistic. So, while Dana's existence could be considered Smith's proof of magic, the novel lacks other elements of the ideal. Butler sets her novel in the very real and undebatable antebellum Maryland and keeps her protagonist Dana's experiences as close to reality as possible within the framework of her ability to break the time-space continuum.

In the introduction to his book, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, David Wittenberg analyzes the intricacies of a reader's perception of time and how that applies to the reader's understanding of the story. I became fascinated by Wittenberg's explanations and the ways they apply to stories in general, even outside the niche of time travel fiction. Butler can be seen as using time travel as a "hyperspatial or metaversal realm of narratological negotiation" (8). Instead of writing a "slave narrative," Butler helped her readers, progressive white readers who approve of miscegenation, negotiate social norms and "quasi transcend 'space'... Between always potentially divergent lines of narration" (8). In other words, she brought together two worldviews in one text, in one narratological frame, making each contend with the realities of the other. While many time travel novels take place in two fully fictional narratological settings—whether past, present or future—*Kindred*[46] carries a historiographical element. Wittenberg analyzes the "psychohistoriographical" ways a time travel novel's hero in that type of charged historical setting can make any choices subjectively (18 [Hayden White]). Because the setting is so realistic, even the power of the speculative is limited. Dana doesn't really have choices about whether to change her family lineage's social position because she is bound by history. She must allow and continue and suffer "to insure my family's survival, my own birth" (Butler 13). *Kindred*'s "anachrony," or lack of

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[46] like Michael Moorcock's novel *Behold the Man* that Wittenberg uses as an exemplar (18). Although Dana is not Jesus, she does have a high position of power among Black people at the time, and she is mystical because of the time travel magic and her futuristic mentality.

time boundaries, only exists as a "paradoxical provocation" for a reader who has purposely forgotten the wide-ranging effect of slavery (7-8). Dana is not in a paradox. She has one choice: survive. The reader is not just looking at basic plot points and arbitrary character motivations, but at a "individual historical event and its capacity to affect and define the broader historical record" (Wittenberg 18). To include the reverse effect, Dana, throughout *Kindred*, has no choice but to act based on her knowledge of "the capacity of that historical record" —the TransAtlantic Slave Trade and its social boundaries— "to define and characterize the individual event[s]" of the novel (Wittenberg 18). Any inclination she might have to play hero will have catastrophic downfalls. All attempts cause harm. *Kindred*'s anachrony exists to bring the reader into a philosophical, historiographic reality, not so that the characters can "relive their own pasts, meet or duplicate themselves" (Wittenberg 7). Most importantly, there is no way, regardless of the existence of a magic in the world that can make a woman time travel, to "retroactively eliminate slices of history, [or] re-experience the same slices in altered versions or lines" (Wittenberg 7). In *Kindred*, Butler proves that for Black people there is no external hero and in fact, no mass salvation.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas writes about American Black people and authors: "Our minds and imaginations have been shaped by and through what Claudia Rankine has termed the racial imaginary" (283). Rankine's idea is that "'One way to know if you're in the presence of—in possession of, possessed by—a racial imaginary is to see if the boundaries of one's imaginative sympathy line up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power'" (284). This is obvious in *Kindred*. Despite time traveling from an era where slavery has long ended, the characters cannot go beyond the real world's rules in almost any way. It is easy to assume that Butler was a product of her time, almost as forward thinking as it was possible for a Black person in the United States to be. Rankine continues "'Many writers of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn't and shouldn't enter, a space for bodies to transcend the legislative, the economic…the stuff that doesn't lend itself much [to] poetry'" (Thomas 283). But she acknowledges that "'Transcendence is unevenly distributed and experienced. White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given…[while] For writers of color, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing'" (283). Smith asks for a dealing in race that

makes Black people royal not stereotypes and not victims. Smith wants so much agency that Black society influences language usage and regulation. Regardless of in-group naming, previously common racial slurs are not tolerated.

This is another thing that Butler's *Kindred* is unable, in its time, to do. In the novel, the word nigger is used to create setting. Immediately when Dana gets to talk to the main antagonist, Rufus, on her second trip to the 1810s, he calls her a nigger and she tries to explain to him why he ought not. He is young, maybe 10, and he knows Dana to be a helpful force so he negotiates to not use the word in their immediate conversation lest she refuse to speak with him. Despite Dana carrying the ethereality of time traveling and being Rufus's proof of magic, this lesson does not last. Into his teen and adult years, as Rufus becomes master of the plantation, he consistently uses the word nigger to describe the enslaved people around him. The enslaved people on the Weylin plantation have no threatening power to enforce their distaste for the word the way Smith implies they can in the present, in public, when it is used by a person they deem inappropriate.[47] This is a display of Rankine's racial imaginary in Butler's work. Rankine believes too many of us "'begin from the place of being addressed, and accessed. To be a person of color in a racist culture is to be always addressable, and to be addressable means one is always within stigma's reach." Dana consistently laments being in an enslaved mindset, despite knowing her time on the plantation is temporary. Because of the difficulty of transcendence, too often modernity seeks to correct history by eliminating it. The aforementioned doesn't keep *Kindred* from being a good, important read. In a world very concerned with the future, *Kindred* is a marker of our past. As mentioned, I find the past deeply important to study, as long as it's not a place we get stuck. My position is that we, especially as Black people, ought to integrate everything from our past that is useful and remember what was not useful (but do so from a remove).[48] Unfortunately there is no element, even a speculative element like an afro

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[47] Smith does not deem it inappropriate for Black people to use the word as it appears frequently in *Don't Call Us Dead*. Their book homie, behind the title page, says, "this book was titled homie because i don't want non-black people to say *my nig* out loud. this book is really titled *my nig*."

[48] I would never say that we ought not read slave narratives or watch TV shows and films about the Transatlantic slave trade. We just have to self-regulate and manage our ability and willingness to take in upsetting visuals. This ought not be the only type of Black narrative that's available. And when presenting

pick or a gun under the mattress, that can save the community from enslavement. The bright spot is that enslavement never meant extinction, and this is the most important of Smith's points and a theme of Butler's novel. There was fear and pain and constant antagonism between Dana and the Weylin family, but there's no bullet in this hero. Despite our long history of hurt, we die and rise again narratologically as well as spiritually. Without slave narratives, we raise a generation that has no reference for our staying power. The job of Black writers and artists, then, is to produce work that highlights the proof of magic or God. We become the proof. Unlike dinosaurs, we are not extinct.

The Space Between Worlds, Afrofuturism, and Resurrection

In considering what we want from the speculative, I was pleased to read Micaiah Johnson's *The Space Between Worlds* (2020). When comparing it to other novels I've read, it seems to attempt and succeed at meeting audiences and critics in the middle. The protagonist and first-person narrator launches immediately into the friction between science and religion. For our purposes, this is also the genre difference between science fiction and fantasy: whether the speculative grounding image or concept is technological or magical. For Johnson, it is both. She writes, "When the multiverse was confirmed, the spiritual and scientific communities both counted it as evidence of their validity. The scientists said, *Look, we told you there were parallel universes*. And the spiritual said, *See, we've always known there was more than one life*" (7). The concept of "traversing" from one world to another and the rules that bind a person's capability of living through the process of traversing are equally attributed to scientific progression and the goddess Nyame. In my interpretation, what differentiates traversing from simple space travel is that the destination is a similar world, running on a parallel timeline, with doppelgangers of everyone on the "original" world. The beginning epigraph says,

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literature to non-Black audiences or children, this should not be the first type of narrative that is reached for.

"'In the far reaches of an infinite cosmos, there's a galaxy that looks just like the Milky Way, with a solar system that's the spitting image of ours, with a planet that's a dead ringer for earth, with a house that's indistinguishable from yours, inhabited by someone who looks just like you, who is right now reading this very book and imagining you, in a distant galaxy, just reaching the end of this sentence. And there's not just one such copy. In an infinite universe, there are infinitely many. In some, your doppelgänger is now reading this sentence along with you. In others, he or she has skipped ahead, or feels in need of a snack and has put the book down'" (6).

Like Smith's dinosaurs, whether traversing and its effects are mild and harmless or antagonistic and amoral is a dual argument. Even Cara, the protagonist, begins by believing only in the science and thinking her only job is research-based.

It is revealed early that the only people capable of doing a traverser's job, that of a "pigeon," are "trash people" (9). It took the whole context of the story before I could fully understand the point Johnson was making by making her first person hero "the brown girl child of an addict" (5). In all of the novel's more than 380 possible worlds, the "children of slaves & immigrants & addicts & exiles" (Smith 16) are the rulers of Ashtown, the emperor and family, the royalty. On Earth Zero, "our primary Earth, the one others think of as real," Ashtown's royalty has exceeded its border and infiltrated Wiley City as well (7). The royal family's outcast in Ashtown becomes the "tenth-richest-man-in-the-city" and the primary social and political influence, due to his scientific genius (10). He also flips from victim to villain in his quest for immortality. It can be theorized that the class system being perpetuated on every Earth is what produces the greed and villainy. Unfortunately, it is exacerbated by the metaphysical law of no duplicate doppelgangers. So, the scientist behind all of Eldridge's technology is not only seeking power and wealth, but also trying to work around Nyame. They step in to help with the knowledge gained and put into action on Earth Zero. Johnson makes a double hero of Cara, and her assistants are primarily others like herself. It is Ashtowners and Ruralites who save their town on Earth 175 and save multiple lives throughout the multiverse.

Jean Sanogo, "the famous" or "Papa Jean by the papers" an older, retired traverser who has moved into a different area of the company, takes Cara under his wing and mentors her (11). He provides her with wisdom influenced by both his current life on Earth Zero and the lives he escaped on other earths. Johnson very respectfully handles the change over from the old school to the new. Cara treats Jean with undying respect and she heeds his words, giving him sway over her opinions. However, this does not keep her from learning the lessons he teaches with such effectiveness that she transcends his application. Jean wants Cara to know everything and do little with her knowledge beyond achieving higher rank. She instead gathers the knowledge and uses it to create a major change that impacts the multiverse. Despite his consistent disagreement with her choice, he sacrifices himself for her success rather than allow her to be harmed simply because he told her so. She then completes the mission in his memory.

I think this is a near perfect depiction of the place Black-literature-as-a-reflection-of-Black-life is in currently. To dismiss and disrespect the old perspectives and the elders that carry them is to wall ourselves off from all of the knowledge they mastered. Neither should we be so dedicated to outdated ideologies that we ignore the world's progress. Another small example of this is that Jean believes in Nyame's presence and power, not just the implications of science and technology. Cara explains that Jean "is the one who told me about Nyame, just like he tells every new traverser. It's the name of a goddess where he comes from, one who sits in the dark holding the planets in her palm" (12). The name Nyame is that of a known goddess of Ghana, so the novel could not any more directly serve as Smith's "proof of magic or God" (line 10).[49] Cara claims she has "never had much use for religion, but I respect [Jean] too much to disagree" (12). In the end, it serves Cara better to acknowledge and commune with Nyame than to ignore her as the scientists do. In another situation, Jean justifies that the upper class have been trading on the lives of people like himself and Cara since the inception of the city's social structure. They do not deserve moral intervention. Cara takes a higher path than self-preservation that inspires a member of that same upper class to aide her in dismantling the oppressive structure with minimal bloodshed. In

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[49] Britannica.com (and other less official sources) refers to Nyame connected to "real life" Ghana.

Afrofuturistic fiction, it makes sense that the elders and mentors do not save the day, but the youth. It cannot be ignored that Cara would not be alive for her heroics without Jean's sacrifice. So, while Smith's poem still presupposes that elders and mentors protect the youth in battle, I think the desire is fulfilled in Johnson's depiction.

When measuring *The Space Between Worlds* against Danez Smith's idea of what a new piece of speculative art looks like, race is a fascinating aspect. Johnson plays on the Afrofuturist idea of post blackness, but she toes a fine line. Almost everywhere that another author would write about race, Johnson writes about the location divide between Wiley City and Ashtown, or about the location divides between different areas outside of Wiley City, or about the financial differences between Wileyites and others. Cara distinguishes between the "trash people" like herself who can safely traverse and those with "their safe, sheltered upbringings in a city that had eliminated childhood mortality and vaccinated most viral illnesses into extinction" (8). Actual discussions of race in the novel are under the radar. It only shows up in subtle ways like Cara calling people "petty" in the modern U.S. Black English context (8, 82)[50] and referring to her 4C hair texture (18). Johnson collapses the ideas of race and class onto each other in a way that deemphasizes race and emphasizes the sociopolitical factors that keep race relevant. In order to get around the law of doppelgangers, "They needed trash people. Poor black and brown people. People somehow on the 'wrong side' of the wall, even though they were the ones who built it. People brought for labor, or come for refuge, or who were here before the first neoliberal surveyed this land and thought to build a paradise. People who'd already thought this was paradise. They needed my people. They needed me" (9). It is purposely unclear if the poverty line, the separation between regular people and "garbage gits," follows race (45). Johnson creates a system where people of color not only self-govern in their area of the world, but also become the most viable and productive candidates for traversing. Traversing, from the beginning, becomes a metaphor for resurrection, for a step toward immortality. For much of the novel, Cara cannot reconcile "Why have I survived?" when her

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[50] Johnson uses petty a third time in the more conventional not AAVE way, to mean small and meaningless rather than just a shade off of rude in a condescending way.

doppelgangers have not (36). Repetitively she asks the question and answers it: "The universe erases me, but it also remakes me again and again, so there must be something worthwhile in this image" (91).

Smith asks for a piece of speculative art that is not easily "dismissed because of its cast or its audience" (25-26). I do not observe any problematic or trope-like characters in this novel, unless the depiction of queer romance reads as trite. I think it reads as any romance would in a novel where the love story takes the background. I also think it is almost necessary to exemplify queer romance in futuristic fiction. To not do so is to ignore an aspect of life and humanity that was ignored or denigrated by our predecessors. The point of Afrofuturism is to move the needle forward. Smith also requests that speculative art not "be about black pain" or center so many painful signifiers that it cannot be enjoyed (28). Johnson's novel is not without pain, but when studied critically rather than breezed over, the thematic ideas of redemption and survival are obvious without being tonally heavy. It could be argued that this novel still is not progressive enough. Smith says "no bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy" yet Johnson's hero can do nothing but die until there is finally a world where she does not have to (32). But, knowing Smith's other work, I suspect that the problem is the finality of death, the elimination of opportunity. The multiple deaths of the traversers, while important and on those worlds sometimes impactful, actually create opportunities on Earth Zero. Cara starts to feel like her life is almost the same in every world and she matters so much that she is almost immortal. She also understands that "Alive doesn't mean anything at all" if a person is "miserable" and she has no desire for "the uselessness of a long" life without happiness (107). Cara's quest for redemption is wrapped up in the processing of these competing ideas as she narrates, "I'm not even sure I can die anymore" (110). Johnson proves what Smith seems to ask for, "Fatalism is not a synonym for blackness" (Womack 11). I did not read *The Space Between Worlds* as in any way stereotypical or canned. It was not overly political or confrontational on the topic of race, only those of class and power. And the effect of those on Black bodies was greatly lessened by the novel's end.

Because this novel is partially postracial, I doubt that language like the n-word exists. No matter what other insults there are, no matter the allusions to race and the way it may or may not correlate to

class, I do not think racial slurs exist on any of Johnson's worlds or the spaces between. That is one thing they seem to have transcended. Perhaps here, the complete absence of this marker is Johnson's way of controlling the word. She, as her text's author-god, wields enough power—historically proven in literature and reality—to enforce her own boundaries. Wittenberg wrote that historiographic speculative fiction, like *Kindred*, does not exist so that the characters can "relive their own pasts, meet or duplicate themselves, retroactively eliminate slices of history, reexperience those same slices in altered versions or 'lines'" (7). Johnson proves that Afrofuturism, or Black fantasy, or speculative fiction can exist for exactly that reason and to the benefit of the textual community at large, not just the protagonist. Caralee seems to interact with her dead selves, apologizing to them, taking on their traits. Even before she reveals to other characters that she is a doppelganger, Cara stops trying to hide behind the singular version of her self on Earth Zero and begins trying to expand to encompass all her "dead" selves, as if they do not feel dead but have absorbed into her. Even though it is not time travel, this causes "a constant stream of decisions being made both ways," in the "real world" and the one to which a protagonist travels (Wittenberg 18). Womack wrote similarly that "Time travel, immortality, reincarnation, and parallel universes create wormholes to supersede limitations of history while restoring power to both the narrative and its readers" (155). Johnson illustrates how "fantasy and the multiverse embraces the greatest power a story can hold by reinstituting the ultimate hero's journey" (Womack 155). Black millennial writers are not enslaved to any imaginary and we name ourselves, like Caralee who used her own other self's objectification to create a new life at least twice. Black artists from the beginning to now, from non-fiction and theory to poetry and hip hop, defend our own control of the language used to label us. The naming power is not in the hands of Anglo-European people—neither the past colonizers nor the present protestors of our usage of the profane. We will continue to write in our own words, creating whatever pidgins and creoles we like.

Framing Narratives and Writing for Ourselves

Storytelling is a power of its own accord, and just as important is the language in which the story is told. Just like Wittenberg says, "narrative itself [is] a 'time machine'... a mechanism for revising the arrangements of stories and histories" (1). As illustrated by Johnson's novel "time traveling might be considered a fundamental condition of storytelling itself" (1). While one could say that time travel is a fundamentally different speculative image than world travel in a multiverse, I think they employ the same concepts. Thomas looks for ways that telling the story of our long history of hurt and middle passage (which has become quotidian to many) exemplifies the imaginative and resurrective power (the speculative power itself) Smith discusses in poem format. Thomas's ideas of narrativizing as a cathartic exercise mirror the same concept Wittenberg used and the same limits he acknowledged when combining the speculative with the historical. To use Wittenberg's terms, Black authors have always been participants in our own collective narratology. There may have been a moment in literary popular history where speculative stories about Black people were still reflective of limiting beliefs about the origins and capabilities of the culture. But the next shift has already begun in our collective imagination and is in full swing. Micaiah Johnson's color-blind family and decentering (not ignoring) of race was previously unseen in literature. Danez Smith, Black U.S. poet, demands our Blackness be fully retained and embodied while the impact of the historical pain and othering is simultaneously destabilized. The difference between Smith's idea, Okorafor's and Adeyemi's application in their work, and the post-black premise is that the transcendence, the resurrection, rests directly on the understanding of the history and the integration of generational strength. We are expansive and all-encompassing because of our past trials and the ways we have taught ourselves to transcend them. We ought to never stop paying attention to our social and literary history. But the widest possible expanse of the diaspora must be considered for our literary tradition.

In this conversation, in my opinion, there is more harm in differentiating our countries of origin—Afrofuturism, a consideration of the white, European or American gaze, and Africanfuturism, a centering of Africa and its influence—than there is benefit, for a few reasons. The world is small and humans are

increasingly mobile. Writers and educators have always been mobile and ease of flight is only increasing that. Also, the complexity of the Black perspective is so unwieldy that complexity should be the base assumption, not similarity or commonality. Blackness is an all-encompassing set of ideologies informed by the Middle Passage and the continent of Africa and many spaces in between. The unifying back story is that despite our Blackness almost always being acted on by a colonizing force (not always the same one), we are always writing and creating new paths to freedom. The problem with Mark Dery's Afrofuturism is a presupposition of "a Blackness that begins with 1619 and is marked solely by the ensuing 400 years of violation by whiteness" (Wabuke 1). Until recently, the theory did not "'destabilize previous analysis of blackness'" enough (Womack 16). The similar but opposite problem of Africanfuturism is where it differentiates itself from that premise but becomes a new limiting factor for all Black people who are not comfortable claiming to be African.[51] Literature is the place where all of our stories meet, and the speculative is another avenue leading to that reunion place, where all of our dreams are possible, pulsing, right there.

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[51] I am deeply aware that not everyone likes the word Black either, but I think it is the closest we can get and I think most sociologists and laity have agreed that it is the best we can do for now.

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Chapter Three

Insurgent Mourning, Resilience, and Glamour in Danez Smith's Poetry

Black artists in mourning "know how to dance and move and make art from life and how to make life about more than survival - how to swell survival into" something more, something transcendent (Velasco 11). In "A World That Cuts," David Velasco writes about artists living with HIV and AIDS and he calls their survival a "storm" (11).[52] In *The Calendar of Loss*, Dagmawi Woubshet refers to the insistence on continued production of art and perseverance beyond oppression as "insurgent mourning" (47). This chapter will look closely at the poems of Danez Smith and how their work epitomizes the transformation from insurgent mourning to "resilience and glamour" (Velasco 12).[53] In the first chapter of this thesis, I validate the widest possible variety of Black voices, even a fictionalized pidgin language, as understandable and artful especially to the in-group. I highlight the parts of Selvon's novel that lean into or rely directly on poetry. In the second chapter, I use a poem from Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* to widen the lens with which we discuss literature and apply theories. I saw an opportunity to put Black authors in conversation with each other. This chapter will compound on the idea of decentering standard and highlighting Black artistry through several more of Smith's poems. I use a theorist of color to interpret Smith's poems, but I highlight some differences in Woubshet's and my critical lenses.

There are many ways Danez Smith's poems exhibit types of Woubshet's "Lyric Mourning" when Woubshet's poets of study were dying before Smith was even born. In the last thirty years, the landscape of AIDS has changed and the landscape of poetry has changed. Woubshet frames his discussion around elegies, and the ways that poets conflate the subject and the object in their poems. Woubshet's premise is that AIDS elegies carry a deeper level of lyric mourning because of the "compounding loss" they catalog (3). Several of Smith's poems clearly portray compounding loss, in a very similar fashion to what

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[52] This essay is specifically the introduction to a book analyzing the work of Kia LaBeija and Julie Tolentino. This description, however, struck me as being true for perhaps this age group of those living with the virus.

[53] Where insurgent is defined as "rising in opposition to civil authority or established leadership" or "rebellious."

Woubshet describes. People and poets with AIDS had to watch their friends and lovers die painful deaths at alarmingly high rates without the proper physical care or appropriate bedside manner. In Danez Smith's world, people and Black boys have to watch their friends and loved ones die brutal and frightening deaths at statistically higher rates than people who do not look like them. They may receive medical attention if the event does not kill them on impact, but the disdainful attitude with which they are treated is an added emotional wound.

Poetics and Aesthetics Clarified

In order to have a meaningful conversation about poetics, I propose some clarification of terms. The Poetry Foundation's glossary has a section on poetic diction that reads like this "The vocabulary, phrasing, and grammatical usage deemed appropriate to verse as well as the deviations allowable for effect within it….Poetic diction is distinguished from common speech by effects such as circumlocution, elision, personification and Latinate terminology such as 'azure skies.'" As explained in another chapter of this thesis, I prefer for terms to make linguistic and etymological sense as often as possible. As a writer or artist, to play with shades of meaning is to use all of the metaphorical colors in the crayon box. But as a critic, theorist, or educator, it makes what should be clear hard to decipher. Breaking down the word poetics, the suffix "ics" means "in the names of sciences or disciplines…to mean 'matters relevant to' and also as the titles of treatises about them" or "1) study, knowledge, skill, practice; 2) characteristic actions or activities; 3) characteristic qualities, operations, or phenomena." Because of the simplicity of these definitions, I am frustrated by the way a reliance on Aristotle's and Wordsworth's treatises overcomplicate the idea. Dictionary.com simply states that poetics are "literary criticism treating of the nature and laws of poetry." The syntactical placement of the words, "the poetics of mourning," "of loss," "of Blackness" is something of a misdirection that would be clarified by swapping out poetics for aesthetics the majority of the time and substituting words like diction, syntax, grammar, and linguistics the other portion of the time. I would argue that when one is discussing topics and ideologies, the conversation is about content, and content is never specific to poetry. When Woubshet gives the

characteristics of lyric mourning and insurgent mourning and calls them poetics, he's employing literary critical style, but our predecessors were often imprecise. The effect the poets achieve is due to syntax—arrangements of words—including repetition and all other literary devices such as metaphor, diction - word choice, and the visual arrangements of words on the page that distinguishes poetry from prose. When Woubshet discusses the content of mourning, loss, and grief, these topics are covered in essays, documentaries, and at least one excellent musical, so they are not distinctly poetics. By contrast, the reason a few critics have discussed Black poetics or a poetics of Blackness is directly correlated (or should be) to the fact that Black people often speak Black English which employs unique diction and syntax, along with figurative language heavily influenced by it. Where this is not the case, where critics employ the idea of Black poetics but their theories are solely about content, I would categorize them the same way: they are following a literary critical tradition of imprecise language that I am attempting to break out of.

Woubshet's Poetics of Mourning

In a very moving piece of literary theory, Woubshet creates a frame about lyric mourning based on the idea that "the subject's loss [is] both object and subject, past and prospective," and that "elegizing another and elegizing oneself are interdependent" (29). Additionally, he categorizes AIDS elegies by saying "the genre's binding work of mourning...undoes its defining difference between the subject and object of grief" (29). In Danez Smith's only named elegy appearing in the collection *Don't Call Us Dead*, there are about ten unique subjects and more than twenty objects. An "elegy in pixels & cum" is about Javier "Kid Chocolate" Bravo, a pornstar also infected with AIDS. The most repeated of the many subjects[54] is an unidentified "they." The most repeated object[55] is "you" or "kid." By Woubshet's first premise, the poem is about "their" loss, the community, the funeral attendees. This would support a difference between this poem and a traditional elegy because the subject is not the deceased. There are

[54] Where subject is defined as the noun doing the action.
[55] Where object is defined as the noun receiving the action.

five lines where Smith exhibits Woubshet's interdependence between subject and object. First, Smith writes "i have the same red shadow running through my veins, kid" (line 10). Then, using the subject "they," Smith lists out what they want from "us," the deceased and the speaker: to be "quiet, redeemed, or dead already...hard, tunnel-eyed, & bucking...to fuck more than...to exist...to know god or be god" (lines 18-21). By those premises, Woubshet's theory aligns.

However, as Woubshet discusses, when Paul Monette, a white poet with AIDS, and others of his community lament what they have lost, they also hold a "nostalgia...for the American ideal—of youth, success, affluence and happy domesticity" (43). There is a race and class element that differentiates Black poets in the AIDS tradition from their white counterparts. This nostalgia does not exist for Danez Smith, who, even before they were HIV positive, and even now that "[AIDS is] not a death sentence anymore," did not live this idyllic life ("recklessly," part 5, line 1). *Don't Call Us Dead* includes poems titled "dear white america" and "you're dead, america;" Smith's poems obviously depict a government system where "history is what it is. it knows what it did" ("summer, somewhere" part 1, lines 6-7). Smith capitalizes on each opportunity to tell of the compounding grievances that have been integral to their life, because "i got this problem: i was born/ black & faggoty/ they sent a boy/ when the bullet missed" ("everyday is a funeral & a miracle," lines 51-54). Smith's lyric mourning is not primarily about an illness that will cause them pain and suffering. It is about racism and homophobia in the United States. The compounding loss is not one or the other but both. When gun violence did not kill the poem's speaker, they became infected with a virus that has no cure. The pronoun "they" in the line seems to indicate a belief that some sentient entity has both the power and the desire to shorten the life of queer Black people. This is solidified by lines 58-59: "America might kill me before i get the chance./ my blood is in cahoots with the law" ("everyday is a funeral & a miracle"). These are recognizable ideas and topics for Black literature.

A Note on Black Aesthetics

As I have already discussed the difference between topics and aesthetics, it is necessary to also be aware of the tradition of Black aesthetics. Woubshet has more to say about insurgent mourning, lyric

mourning, and Negro spirituals. While his theories are a valuable foundation, their application just skirts Black literary history as a record of Black life. For me, because of the definitions mentioned above, it is an overcomplication to distinguish the terms poetics and aesthetics when a bit of theory has already limited itself to the genre of poetry. By using truncated lines, using specific stanza lengths and meter, or by arranging the lines in patterns on the page, poetry is characteristically an aesthetic exercise. Whatever art and beauty is not conveyed between the black lines and white spaces is often in poetry's inclination toward imagery and allusion which are both categorically aesthetic. Woubshet refers to the AIDS epidemic as a "mass calamity" (31). Smith seems prompted by compounding loss to wonder about a different mass calamity: "is that what being black is about?/...the feeling/you get when you are looking/at your child, turn your head/ then, poof, no more child./ that feeling. that's black" (lines 20-25). I wrote in the margin of an earlier poem in Smith's book: are Black poetics the poetics of pain? And I think the answer is both yes and no.

In her book *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*, Evie Shockley cautions that, for the good of the entire field of Black literary studies, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that markers of race in a poem's content will be on the surface. She writes "For this reason, it is important that we are able to work with a conceptualization of Black Aesthetics fluid enough to account for the wide variety of experiences, concerns, and poetics that African-American poets have, but grounded enough in social and literary histories relevant to a given poet's work to provide the necessary analytical precision" (Shockley 196). Humans will always carry shades of variety. No two are the same even if they have lived near identical experiences. In connecting Woubshet's theory with Smith's poetry, I look to Shockley's note for consideration: "scholars and critics of poetic traditions that include or overlap with African-American poetry need to be aware of the breadth of ways that 'blackness' or racial politics may manifest itself in work by African-American poets" (Shockley 196). These are the ideologies behind post-blackness: we center our humanity rather than our race. The idea has much merit. I think language is the primary factor that binds a study of Black aesthetics. There are infinite ways to be a human in Black skin, but there are only so many words in the English language,

and only so many ways to be understood as Black poets and hip hop artists creolize the language. So, despite what some may see as a limit to the racial imaginary[56] when we are attempting to define or categorize Black aesthetics and poetics, it is not a limit to our personage but an observation of the limits that naturally exist in the language in which we are writing. The study, then, is in the ways poets construct, deconstruct, and expand the boundaries of the language.

That said, even as I take a view of Blackness as informed by the entire diaspora, I only understand the nuances of Black literature as it is written in the English language. Just like there are cultural similarities between Black people worldwide, my research has already shown there are ideological similarities between Black theorists and artists worldwide. In the same way, a theory of Black aesthetics, even as it foregrounds human mobility, will have discrepancies where the languages change. There may be ten things Black poets have in common in every language, but five more that are unique to those writing in English and do not translate to those writing in Spanish or French.[57] This does not mean that all those poets who identify as Black can be said to use Black aesthetics. Blackness does not always show up, according to Shockley, in poetry the same way.[58] This brings us back to the observation of Black English as a creole language. There are several ways, specifically the sporadic ellipsis of articles (a, an, the) and the standardization (rather than Latin-based languages' variance) of conjugated verbs, in which Black English mirrors Indigenous languages. For example, when Smith writes "your body still your body, your arms still wing" ("a note on the body" lines 1-2), we know that they left the verb "is" out of both lines intentionally and an article "a" or "the" out of the second line. This serves to emphasize the

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[56] Rankine continues her discussion of the racial imaginary, discussed in the previous chapter, with the extension "'Many writers of all backgrounds see the imagination as ahistorical, as a generative place where race doesn't and shouldn't enter, a space for bodies to transcend the legislative, the economic…the stuff that doesn't lend itself much [to] poetry'" (Thomas 283). But she acknowledges that 'Transcendence is unevenly distributed and experienced. White writers often begin from a place where transcendence is a given…[while] For writers of color, transcendence can feel like a distant and elusive thing'" (Thomas 283).

[57] How much more fascinating to discover what is present and what might be missing in Indigenous languages rather than those learned through colonization.

[58] Our analyses and critiques must allow for artistic diversity in methodology but sociopolitical diversity in content and theme.

remaining nouns and pronouns. For me as a theorist, the use of Black English is purposefully a rhetorical device and it is a marker of the Black aesthetic. It is a rhetorical device in that it is hyper conscious, thought out, not accidental or default under the suspicion that writers who speak Black English have not mastered writing in standard English.[59] It is a, one potential, not the sole marker of the Black aesthetic because there are likely just as many Black writers who do not employ it as those who do.[60] Hoyt Fuller, a giant in Black literary history, wrote in "Towards a Black Aesthetic" about the Black Arts Movement, "The writers are deliberately striving to invest their work with the distinctive styles and ribbons and colors of the ghetto" (155). Despite the outmoded term, "ghetto," Fuller was describing Black English. Lauded, contemporary, (Black) linguist John McWhorter writes, "We must always beware of stereotyping and be open to the counterintuitive, but here is an instance where we can trust our senses: There is a 'Black sound.' It's not just youth slang; it's sentence patterns...and a 'sound,' such that you'd know Morgan Freeman was black even if he were reading the phone book" (10). McWhorter goes on to acknowledge: "The same way spoken English is stratified and judged by whether it meets the standard of non-Black grammar, written English —i.e. literature—is stratified by its accessibility to a white audience" (10). While McWhorter finishes that thought with the idea that "accessibility is assessed in terms of palatable themes," I use his own theories of language and experience in literature conversations to assert that when white critics find Black literature inaccessible and unpalatable—especially in the contemporary era after the influence of hip hop on all popular culture and the formal study of the artform—it is due equally if not more to language than theme (10).

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[59] John McWhorter would tell you that to assume someone is only capable of one language and that the one language is not the standard language of the place in which they live is a racist assumption that proves itself to be false across languages and countries.

[60] Hoyt Fuller cites an extensive section of a review of Black style by one George Frazier, a white columnist, who was known to not support the Black Arts Movement. He seemed, however, to hold Amiri Baraka's work in a positive light, and to understand and not denigrate the Black aesthetic. The following is his assessment of our language as he was trying to define as Black Aesthetic: "'for what nuances, what plays of light in the shade, what little sharpness [common] speech has are almost all of them, out of the black world —the talk of Negro musicians and whores and hoodlums and what not. 'Cool' and all the other words in common currency came out of the mouth of Negroes…. Forever creative, forever and more stylish'" (Fuller 155-156).

An aspect of the BAM proscription of a Black aesthetic was an insistence on accessibility, and that accessibility showed up in a variety of ways. Shockley points out that Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks were concerned with making their topic accessible through empathetic means (more tone, mood, and content) while Harryette Mullen used her form and methodology of fragmented repetition. Shockley notes that we must take care to not only attend to function, as in content and commentary, but also to form. Shockley as a literary critic, like McWorter as a linguist, is firm in her assertion that accessible and rudimentary are not synonyms. The essence of every intersectional identity that exists alongside being Black must be and is being revised by twenty-first century scholars and critics in order to continually refine the aesthetic outlined by the elders. Aime Cesaire, the father of Negritude,[61] is quoted as saying, "Ultimately poetry is simply its own language, language...of 'both nostalgia and prophecy,' which leads to salvation because it is capable of 'recollecting being and intensifying life'… The language before the plurality of languages, the language of being itself" (Diagne 128). This chapter is one of many on a quest to become masters of, as Shockley calls it: "The ways 'blackness' functions" in literature (197).

One of Smith's collections of poems, *Don't Call Us Dead,* begins with "summer, somewhere." This poem is 19 pages long, split into 20 distinct parts. Each part, except for 16 and 17, is written in 8 couplets, although Smith does not force rhyme. Smith takes up wide, expansive page space to set up the book's premise. Other topics will be covered, the tone will shift and then shift back, but everything will relate back to the ideas brought up in this opening poem. Smith orients the reader to the images that will be used to signify Blackness. Immediately in the setting, "boys brown/ as rye play the dozens & ball" (part 1, lines 1-2). I was an adult before I knew "the dozens" had a name. It was just an activity Black boys did, trading insults to see who could draw the biggest laugh. The activity was nearly constant in the background of conversations until someone got angry at the insults and started a fight or left. This would pause the dozens for a couple of hours. Part 2 of Smith's poem continues with leisure activities, depictions of Black fun, run together because the activities are not distinct. The importance is the mood of

[61] Black pride and power as it was termed in the Caribbean.

levity they set: “cypher/feast/hoop” (line 2). The first few parts of the elongated “summer, somewhere” also serve to prove that the subjects are undeniably Black. There are depictions of skin, like the rye bread already mentioned: “a boy/ the color of a July well spent” (part 1, lines 8-9) “here, there’s no language/ …no color to call white” (part 1, lines 11-12), and “tiny teethed brown beasts” (part 9, line 3). As well as several allusions and direct references to hair: in part 2 we see “his braids” (line 5) and “durag” (line 10), “their naps” (part 3, line 8), and part 5 uses the image of a mother doing hair to ground the entire section. The subject of each poem shifts, but the subject of Smith’s work is consistent. Especially in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, there will be a line or a stanza somewhere in almost every poem that strikes the tone of insurgent mourning.

Insurgent Mourning

Woubshet writes about how the topic of loss is expressed poetically in writers from the era of the AIDS epidemic. Loss brings a range of common feelings and reactions. We grieve for what was and is no more. Loss and grief are familiar frameworks for poetic tone and mood. There also seems to be another pain in the example of Negro spirituals about which Woubshet writes and the poems of Smith: the fear and pain of being targeted. This may be the more specific element to which Woubshet was referring when he named “insurgent mourning” although he did not draw that direct connection (47).[62] But Woubshet

[62] “These acts of speech and embodiment—full of wit and biting political commentary, and often dramatically and artfully choreographed—are central to the archive of early AIDS loss. They show the insurgent uses of mourning for the ostracized and also illuminate the rich interplay between the aesthetics and politics of grief” (4-5). Woubshet also analyzes a Black poet alive in the height of the AIDS epidemic, Melvin Dixon. In dealing with Dixon, Woubshet acknowledges: “Nostalgia for the American dream is uncharacteristic of Dixon’s poems and black poetry more generally. Given how marred America has been with black death and suffering, black lyric subjectivity has had little recourse in that kind of nostalgia (43). Woubshet claims: “I don’t mean to set up an easy binary between “black” and “white” mourning, or to romanticize black suffering—no. Instead, I am suggesting that, given the persistence of death in black collective life and imagination, black AIDS mourners, including well-to-do poets like Dixon, rarely thought of AIDS as an isolated calamity, but rather saw it as one in a series of calamities that characterized their people and their country” (44). I don’t take issue with Woubshet’s arguments and his reading of Dixon is thorough and bright. I just wanted to make explicit what Woubshet hints at. The Negro spirituals are the same as the Black AIDS poems and the same as the contemporary backlash against police violence because they all exist on a communal continuum. They are not just similar. They are echoes of the same insurgent mourning.

names a third pain present in Negro spirituals which I assert is present in Danez Smith's work: the feeling that accompanies the pain of always being without, of not being able to mourn what others mourn because we never possessed it. Woubshet calls it the feeling of being "disprized" and yet he fails to explain the affect[63] of disprizement particular to the tradition of Black writers. The affect of "insurgent mourning" as a theoretical term accomplishes what the term "disprizement" cannot. Disprizement happens to a person, and their reaction may be insurgent mourning. It makes space for anger and for action and for radicalization. Woubshet acknowledges these attendant emotions, but Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* seems to demand that readers never forget the duality of the author. Smith is both an AIDS poet and a Black poet, both beyond the AIDS epidemic and fully entrenched in a system that threatens their life at the same or a higher rate than the virus. This tendency toward insurgent mourning in literature can be categorized as lyric mourning based on compounding loss with a tone of obstinate opposition. It could be thought of competing tones: one of grief and one of defiance.

Smith masterfully eases into these ideas in *Don't Call Us Dead*. The collection begins with the aforementioned poem in parts "summer, somewhere," in which Smith gradually releases the compounding images of death. When you first read that Black boys "jump/ in the air & stay there," it is likely not obvious that this is a euphemism for dying (part 1, lines 2-3). Even when they write "here, not earth/ not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts/ turned ruby gowns" one hopes the ruby is not blood but we realize as we continue reading that it likely is (lines 9-11). Smith closes part one with a clear indication and slightly in-group allusion. The as-yet-unknown speaker asks "please, don't call/ us dead, call us alive someplace better" (lines 13-14). We see the collection title and a framing of the forthcoming themes. Considering again the request for the "tide" to "at least/ spit back a father or two" (lines 5-6) and "we go out for sweets & come back" (line 16) the ideas of fatal injustice against those who present as

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[63] Here affect is in the noun form: "a set of observable manifestations of an experienced emotion; the facial expressions, gestures, postures, vocal intonations, etc., that typically accompany an emotion; the conscious emotion that occurs in reaction to a thought or experience"

Black males are solidified.[64] The last line of part 1 helps to make sense of the middle where the speaker says "i won't get started./ history is what it is. it knows what it did" (6-7). With that, a cultural history of injustice is invoked.

Woubshet compares and contrasts AIDS elegies with Negro spirituals using research from Melissa Zeiger and Lawrence Levine. Zeiger wrote about AIDS elegists as both "living poet and the lost object of mourning" because "they are themselves at risk" (31). Woubshet touts the "mass calamity" of AIDS and theorizes that compounding loss is a "constitutive feature of spirituals" without acknowledging the mass calamity of Blackness (31). Woubshet uses Levine to prove how "slave songs formalize loss" (31). He quotes Levine's work: "'Christianity provided slaves with the precedents, heroes, and future promise that allowed them to transcend the purely temporal bonds [slavery]" (32). But this is not the transcendence to which Danez Smith clings. Their ability to extend emotion and ideology outside of traditionally boundaries does not require a separation from the Black body. The spirituals with which Woubshet and Levine interact are, in their timing, not only past and present, but "reaching upward to incorporate the divine" (32). Smith reaches inward, or to their neighbors' hands and finds divinity there. In "not an elegy," Smith also "brings into view a death-bound lyric subject who stresses death not [only] as transcendence, but as an impending fact here and now" (Woubshet 32). And death is impending for the whole community, not only those infected with HIV, but, according to "not an elegy," everyone Black.[65] Smith is "'literally willing themselves re-born'" (Woubshet[66] 32): "bring the boy. his new name/ his same old body. ordinary, black/ dead thing. bring him & we will mourn/ until we forget what we are mourning" (16-19). Smith creates a break on the page after the correlation of compounding loss to the ethos of Blackness. The eight lines in that separated section exemplify Smith's insurgence, their obstinance opposition to the disprizement of the Black community in the aftermath of loss:

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[64] Fatherlessness is commonly cited as the problem of Black disprizement. Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, left his house to buy Skittles candy and was shot to death by George Zimmerman.

[65] "is that what being black is about?/...the feeling/you get when you are looking/at your child, turn your head/ then, poof, no more child./ that feeling. that's black" (lines 20-25)

[66] Here Woubshet is quoting Levine.

"think: once, a white girl

was kidnapped & that's the Trojan War.

later, up the block, Troy got shot

& that was Tuesday. are we not worthy

of a city of ash? of 1,000 ships

launched because we are missed?

i demand a war to bring the dead child back.

i at least demand a song.   a head" (26-33).

Later in the same poem, Smith echoes the feeling of impending death with a more specific cause, police violence: "prediction: the cop will walk free/ prediction: the boy will still be dead" (lines 78-79). The word prediction leads to the feeling of inevitability. There seems to be no reprieve or solution. The loss is incessant and Smith says "i am sick of writing this poem" (15). Smith references a third cause of death, suicide, and wonders at the latent fear that might be synonymized with insurgent mourning: "people at the funeral/ wondered what made him do it. people said/ he saw something. i think that's it…./what? the world? a road?/ trees? a pair of ivory hands?/ his reflection?/ his son's?/ a river saying his name?" (lines 91-98). Any of the aforementioned are things that could kill a Black boy, so his funeral carries not only grief but fear of what may happen to whom next. All of this is Smith "rehearsing their imminent deaths and formalizing a prolepsis of mourning in lyric form" (Woubshet 32). While Smith's insurgent mourning will not let readers forget about the compounding loss, they also do not wallow in depths of dark tones and moods. They ask readers not to call Black boys dead, but to lean into a spiritual transcendence that helps anchor communal resilience.

Resilient Transcendence

In a quest of rhetoric that aides in resilience, Smith's work decenters much of what is traditionally thought to be sacred or worthy of worship and replaces those icons with an unending stream of Black boys' bodies. In "summer, somewhere" part 1 on the first page of the collection begins the nature imagery

that carries throughout, helping to elevate the Black boys' bodies to the same status as natural elements. Smith writes that "boys become new/ moons, gum-dark on all sides" (lines 3-4) and "if snow fell" in this place outside of life, neither earth nor heaven, "it'd fall black" (line 13). In the fourth part of the poem, whose speaker seems to be a parent processing the grief of a child gone too soon, they say "praise your sweet rot/ unstitching under soil, praise dandelions/ draining water from your greening, precious flesh" (lines 12-14). Nature metaphors become more and more prevalent as they are the foundation of parts 6, 11, and 18 as well.

Part 6 begins with a question that sets the tone of past disappointment and pain: "do you know what it's like to live/ on land who loves you back?" (lines 1-2). The first sadness is in the line break. The speaker is uncertain what life feels like. Then the personification of the land becomes a consistent way Black boys are characterized in the following parts of this poem. The claim is that there is no longer a need to study landscapes and terrains, to search the horizon, or, in Black English, to *keep your head on a swivel*[67] because "we safe everywhere./ point to whatever you please/ & call it church, home, or sweet love./ paradise is a world where everything/ is sanctuary & nothing is a gun" (lines 4-8). Line 8 is the first direct usage of the most common object of murder, a gun. Smith alludes to the common killer of Black boys— "wicked metals" (part 3, line 11), and those who usually wield the weapon— "officer or law" (part 1, line 12), "bonefleshed men in blue" (part 2, line 8), but this is the first naming. This first half of the poem translates safety and peace, as one would feel if they never had to fear a purposeful or stray bullet. By using the images of church and sanctuary, Smith reminds the reader that Black communities, Black boys, want to thrive in places they deem holy just like everyone else.

The second half shows the difference between the "old forest" (11) and this unfamiliar, unexplored "land" (2) where Black boys are "alive someplace better" (part 1, line 14). The lines "here, if it grows it knows its place/ in history" rename a Black boy as a natural element that can evolve and his death becomes a marker of an important historical, and likely political, moment when he left earth and

[67] My translation and exposition.

arrived someplace better (9-10). The speaker is acclimating to this someplace and explaining the process as they come to understand it. The succeeding lines are all personification and mood setting. The new part of the land is receiving something like a verbal tour from those who have been there longer: “yesterday, a poplar/ told me of old forest/ heavy with fruits i’d call uncle” (10-12). The poplar is likely reminding the newcomer of their previous place, perhaps one older than the newcomer but that the poplar remembers, an old forest, a bygone era. Perhaps this is a reminder of life on earth, before the death that transported them all. There are dual layers of signifying here. The first signifier is the type of tree—poplar—and the second is that the old forest has trees “heavy with fruits” or reincarnated Black men who the speaker would “call uncle.” As if Smith wants to be certain the reader gets it, they add that the fruits were once “bursting red pulp” or bleeding “& set afire,” a literal reference (line 13). The strange uncle fruits made music for elders like Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, providing a “harvest of dark wind chimes” (14).[68] Smith knows that wherever you have trees and Black people, you have the collective memory of lynching. Even in a poem about being reborn, transfigured, Smith will not erase our collective Black past. This poem is reclaiming nature, trees, and forests as safe places of comfort and reprieve, unsullied by society. In this transcended world, the poplar is now a storytelling friend and helper rather than a killing instrument: “after i fell from its limb/ it bandaged me in sap” (15-16).

It is with the sixth part that we can contextualize much of the previous. Part 1 is a vague introduction. The speaker in part 2 is trying to explain something the reader could not have yet grasped reading in page number order. They tell their experience: “this is how we are born: come morning/ after we cypher/feast/hoop, we dig/ a new one from the ground” (1-3). We might have known the “new one” was a boy who has passed from life on earth to someplace better. But now when we see the transcended “take/ him out his treebox, shake worms/ from his braids,” the “treebox” is more than a wooden casket and the worms are more than decay (3-5). He has not only been buried but planted and expected to rise

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[68]“Southern trees bear a strange fruit/ Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze/ Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees” —an iconic song first sung by Billie Holiday in 1939 and again by Nina Simone in 1965.

again.[69] The middle lines of part 3 provide continuity with the previously stated: “years ago/ we plucked brothers from branches/ peeled their naps from bark” (6-8). “Brothers” here is the common in-group nickname for Black males and “naps” is a description of hair texture. That their hair, their scalps were “peeled…from bark” is likely another allusion to lynching. The previously mentioned mother grieving her lost son is a tool Smith is using to drive the process of the transfiguration. In part 4, the mother doesn’t know much but that her son was “just dead” (5) and she has an inclination to “dig you up, bury you right” (6). Here digging up is a dual reference to the common way people might want to dig up a grave and burying is doubly how bodies are buried under the earth and the way someone might treat a tree planted incorrectly. She wants to “scrape dirt until my hands are raw/ & wounds pack themselves with mud,” a continued dual process that is made clearer after the metaphor in part 6. Like any mourning mother hoping for just a bit more time, she wants to “dig you up, let it rain twice/ before our next goodbye./ dear sprinkler dancer, i can’t tell if I’m crying/ or if i’m the sky” (9-12). The ethereal uncertainty here is indicative of what most of us carry: a lack of clarity about the connection between earthly life and whatever may come after. Part 6 indicates that these ponderings and their implications for connectedness are even more acute when the person who dies is too young. The uncle fruits don’t seem to be in the exact same turmoil.

As stated, parts 6, 11, and 18 are in clear conversation, almost repetition. Part 11 is the only in the whole series that almost completely lacks pronouns. With all of the above understanding, it becomes very clear, however. Smith continues with the extended metaphor of nature and extends it still further, mixing it some, as the idea of a new plane of existence solidifies in the speaker’s mind. They write “the forest is a flock of boys/who never got to grow up” (1-2). To continually make it clear that these are Black boys, the poet writes that the “flock” is “blooming into forever/ afros like maple crowns/ reaching sap-slow toward the sky (3-5). The slowness of sap is a reminder that forever is a long time and that this state is

[69] I imagine this quotation is in the forefront of Smith’s mind when the topic of burial and resurrection comes up, just like it is mine: “They tried to bury us, they didn’t know we were seeds,” another poem quoted and remixed over decades.

permanent. The "blooming" and "reaching" indicate the reversal of the burying process whose image grounds this poem. The reader is then instructed four times to "watch." First, Smith employs a rare capital letter with the directive to "watch/ Forest run in the rain, branches/ melting into paper soft curls, duck/ under the mountain for shelter" (5-8). A boy who may be named Forest is escaping the rain that may be mothers' tears, and the curls tell us he is Black.[70] But then we are instructed to "watch/ the mountain" under which Forest ducked for shelter "reveal itself a boy" (8-9). Once revealed "watch Mountain & Forest playing/ in the rain" because that is what boy together do: find joy (10-11). The last directive can be read as a nod to the pain of mothers and its constant presence in the background of Black life: "watch the rain melt everything/ into a boy with brown eyes & wet naps —" (11-12). This compounding pain, this calendar of loss must be held alongside the joy and serenity of the someplace better as "the lake turns into a boy in the rain/ the swamp —a boy in the rain/ the fields of lavender —brothers/ dancing between the storm" (13-16). With the tears of mothers, Black boys grow someplace better than the earth that killed them. They are every form of vegetation and even the majestic terrain of this haven that finally loves them back.

Smith's book proves a mastery of poetics that refreshes the same topic over and over by focusing on it from different angles. Because speaker and poet are not automatically the same, there are shades of grey in Smith's poems as in all where it is not obvious who is who. Woubshet also discusses a subcategory "self-elegizing." He explains how "elegizing one's own literal death changes the uses of inconsolability" (31). This inconsolability is in the same vein as insurgent mourning. However, "modern poets employ inconsolable mourning mainly for poetic gain—to help them resist the old consolations in nature, God, and poetry that became suspect in the twentieth century" (31). Smith's work does not shirk these particular consolations (although their dealing with God transforms the deity) but embraces them. Woubshet continues, "AIDS elegists like Dixon…use inconsolable mourning not merely for poetic profit, however, but literally for survival. …[Their] being still here, hinges on continuing to express [their] rage

[70] This is perhaps a reference to major actor Forest Whitaker, although it is not as clear why.

and retorts on the lyric page" (31).[71] If these theories of elegy are to be taken as normative, I understand why Smith writes so frequently about the deceased without categorizing many poems as elegies. It makes sense as well that even when Smith is lamenting their own future death, it does not follow the same ideas of self-elegizing.

Smith's "everyday is a funeral & a memory" can be analyzed in the tradition of Melvin Dixon's "One by One" to explicate the compounding loss of life. By definition of the words self and elegy, this poem would seem to be one, but immediately Black body is unified with nature, as throughout Smith's work. The first stanza is Smith imagining that they are already dead speaking to their mother from the grave as "[their] mother shovel[s] dirt down [their] throat"[72] (line 2). In the second stanza, Smith wrestles with the fact that they are not out to their grandmother who believes they are "just having trouble finding a wife" (13-14) thinking forward, in prolepsis, to the time when their grandmother at their funeral will know they died of AIDS which they contracted because they are gay (lines 7-18). It could be argued that Smith is more inconsolable about the condition of othered Blackness than about their disease. They go on to conjoin the unarmed killing of Black people by police to their proleptic death from AIDS. They write: "hallelujah! today I rode/ past five police cars/ & I can tell you about it" (19-21) and then they call the human immuno virus "little/ cops running inside/ my veins, hunting/ white blood cells" (lines 25-28). Smith names three victims of police killings and three organs that would fail from immuno compromise, followed by: "some of us are killed/ in pieces, some of us all at once" (lines 37-38). Seeming to get fed up with the rhetoric, although their work is devoted to it, they write "look, i'm not going to manufacture/ any more sadness. it happened. it's happening" (lines 55-57). This commitment to Smith's truth, this determination to prove that one eventuality is as tragic as the other, shows why disprizement is an insufficient term. Something more raw is needed. An insurgent mourning is called for here, one that works itself out as an art that pays homage to other forms of art like dance. Smith's work embraces

[71] Here Woubshet is summarizing the theories of Jahan Ramazani.
[72] The poem is in the first person so the "their"s were both "my."

consolation, through aesthetic beauty and fun, but it articulates that the consolation, the freedom to feel anything other than sadness, is the prize we fight for through expression.

When Smith uses the same poetic apostrophe of “O” that Woubshet delineates as a marker of grief in Negro spirituals, they repurpose it. Woubshet writes, “Apostrophe and exclamation are the key rhetorical figures in this mourning call [“Master if Going to Sell Us Tomorrow”]. The apostrophe ‘O’ becomes the most repeated sound in the poem, saturating it with moaning that refuses to cease” (34). But Smith uses it towards the end of “tonight, in Oakland,” a poem neither elegy nor “self-elegy,” arguably one of Smith’s least sad poems. Smith has plans for taking joy back. They write: “tonight, we bury nothing” (line 19). They have plans for learning how to exist in a world where they and their community members who look like them and love like them are targets. They write: “two men… one dressed in what could be blood/before the wound, meet & mean mug/ & God, tonight, let them dance! tonight/ guns don’t exist. tonight, the police/ have turned to their God for forgiveness” (lines 13-19). It is contextual to infer that “blood before wound” refers to before infection, and Smith insists on context. But then the characters are drawn out of their fears and pains to dance, to enjoy the beauty of life and love. Here we see Smith’s spiritual transcendence: “tonight, let everyone be their own lord./ let everywhere two people stand be a reunion/of ancient lights. let’s waste the moon’s marble glow/ shouting our names to the stars until we are/ the stars. O, precious God! O, sweet black town!” (lines 23-27). Smith’s “O” becomes an exclamation, less an “alphabet of sorrow” or “sound of unrelieved grief” (Woubshet 34). Where there is grief, “tonight, in Oakland,” “it is also an escape and a mask...a resilience and glamour” (Velasco 12).

Glamour, Fun, and Allusion

Through this art of insurgent mourning, Smith displays consistent duality while also providing a breath of fresh air for those of us Black readers who hear duality and immediately think of DuBoisian double consciousness. DuBois’s perspective, though foundational, is claustrophobic as it traps us between our diverse Blackness and the white gaze. Smith’s duality casts off DuBois, not by ignoring the white

gaze, but by "twerking"[73] in its face and daring it to protest. Smith's duality both is and is not the two-spirit, of both genders, of the non-binary. In *Don't Call Us Dead*, Smith's duality is the line between innocent Black boy and mourning Black adult and the line between life and death. Smith does not lead a carefree life. Even though AIDS is now manageable and everyone hopes medicine will continue to advance, Smith has made us aware that the virus is not the only threat on their life. They position themself as outside poet, personal speaker in the poem, and speaker representative of the collective in various pieces. The effect is to tell a story of Blackness from many angles, the semi-objective, the very subjective, and the middle ground.

I am especially interested in, amused and delighted by, the way Smith layers tones, lessening the heaviness of mortality, by regularly interjecting levity right in between lines of pain. Smith also accomplishes this with the order of the poems in the *Don't Call Us Dead* collection. It transitions from the 22-page treatise on deified pain ("summer, somewhere") to the first indictment of the United States ("dear white america"). Next is "dinosaurs in the hood" where the overall tone is the carefree wonder of a Black boy seeing "real-ass dinosaurs" (line 17). Then "it won't be a bullet" connects the previous themes with the upcoming: "i'm not the kind of black man who dies on the news" (line 7). Smith continues describing the kind of Black existence they have lived through the "last summer of innocence" which seems to tell about identifying with queerness. Next, "a note on Vaseline" discusses masturbation and so many of the signifiers that attend to the prevalence of that product in Black homes. This is followed by two poems about experiences on dating apps and one where the title is another use of "O" as a pleasant exclamation rather than mourning.[74]

The popular fun topics in Smith's work are music, dancing, and sex. It could even be said that Smith is partially known as a poet who writes about twerking. *The Four Way Review* published two of them in one issue in 2013 and *The BreakBeat Poets* anthology from 2015 features two more. When you

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[73] Merriam Webster defines twerking as: "sexually suggestive dancing characterized by rapid, repeated hip thrusts and shaking of the buttocks especially while squatting."

[74] "O nigga O" is only seven lines long. The middle four lines are framed as multiple choice answers to the question regarding the title, "the above is" (line 1). Three of the answer choices allude to sex.

search for poems by Danez Smith about twerking, the results also show Jason B. Crawford's poem "After Twerking in White Spaces (after Danez Smith)." Along with this apparent love of dancing, music and fun, Smith never shies away from sex and the erotic. In "cue the gangsta rap when my knees bend," the title is the poem's contextualization and it is up to interpretation how many of the actions are what I have always called "dance faces" and gestures and how many are allusions to intercourse. Using that apostrophe again, "The only word my mouth cares for is O" and we each get to decide the specificity of this particular O (line 15).[75] The bending of the knees could also be the motion of getting into a car "because my mouth is a whip" (1) and "he whips me/ around" (5-6) could easily be a double entendre indicative of some physical interaction between lovers—in sex or in dance—as well as "he" drives the speaker in a car called a "whip."[76] The car reference is indicated as well by the "bass," and the "leather seats, detailed flame/ you know, some comfy, show-offy shit/fit for music" (3-4). The bass is the way people adjust the sounds on car stereos to levels that make the whole car or the whole block vibrate with sound waves. Smith writes that "the song need to have claws" (12) and that "the only music" they prefer is "the kind that bites" (16). It seems that gangsta rap may be the speaker's preferred soundtrack when there are no obligations on the schedule (6-7) so the couple can "just cruise, just eight/ oh, eight inches of tar/ for me to glide & boom" (7–9). Tar can be used to quickly cover road problems, or it can allude to skin color. When the speaker claims "my head bob the same, my spit be ready/to brawl" the head bob and the spit double as sex acts and rap (11-12). They could be bobbing their heads to the music and spitting the lyrics. In the poem "twerk (v.)," Smith gives instructions about the undercurrent of this dance. It gives people the opportunity to "weep through pores" (2) or sweat, and "let a NGH[77] cry in public" (3) where the sweating is a release, perhaps so much so that the rivulets on one's face mask the tears or give the same catharsis as crying would. This is resilience turned into glamour. Twerking will "keep the body from knowing what it knows" (1) about Black pain, about sickness, about the human experience. If one

[75] Though contextually, here, it is not mourning.
[76] Turning nouns into verbs is a common linguistic trend in American English (ex: "to friend" someone on social media) and cars are frequently called whips in Black English.
[77] I feel very confident that NGH is supposed to simulate the sounds that will make up "nigga."

does it well, as is implied by the way the movement "make his tender muscle flex, tantrum" (9) then people will make extra space on a dance floor and stand back to watch: "dilate the room's hundred eyes" (10). The goal seems to be that the dancer is taken out of the mental space of whatever is happening in life to "spin light into a gown of hands" (7), perhaps in a vogue, and "glimmer the black of your knees" (11), perhaps with sweat. In this putting on a fun and aesthetic performance, they can "finally know the reason the body is" (12). Poems like this one display the insurgent mourning, resilience, and glamour all in one place, especially when a reader has the context of Smith's other work. The first three lines about sadness, tears, and knowing information that haunts could have been left off this time. But insurgence is antithetical to ignorance.

Between the stubborn insistence on remembering the way things are and the decision to have fun in the midst of it all is the spiritual unraveling that Smith consistently uses to demonstrate resilience and how to persevere. Even here, Smith tells us it is okay to "forget your god's name, your mother's/[and] be delivered through your own hips/ [because] holy the ether of your waist" (4-6). The deifying of the Black body, the embrace of the sexual, and the reclamation of freedom to be sexual are signposts of the resilience that Smith believes us to be capable of. The poem "SLOW TWERK" carries many of the same elements, but focuses more on an interaction between lovers. In this poem, the subject of a set of lines is often left out and when present are "he," "him" and the possessive "his" occur three times more than "you"/ "your." The slow twerk is a benefit for a lover and a tool for managing his emotions. Of course, it is also godlike: it can "tame a brushfire" and it is "how the war was won" (lines 1 and 6). These movements are "the hymn written across his veins" and "his favorite kind of Sunday" (lines 18 and 20). The most often referenced of poems where Smith's love for twerking is obvious (rather than alluded to) is "TWERKING AS A RADICAL ACT OF HEALING." The title immediately indicates that it will speak to the stages of grief, acceptance, and transcendence wrapped up in the glamour of performative dance. It is written as a series of instructions from Smith to "you." The spontaneity of the right place and time to twerk for healing mirrors the spontaneity of how Black bodies are afflicted. We do not know when the police will pull us over, when a bullet will come or "when your song plays," but when the last occurs,

"steal your body/ back" (lines 1-2). In order to heal emotionally, "dance until the only thing you're sure of is the ache/ in your thighs" (lines 4-5). Referencing again the interplay of systems of oppression, Smith instructs a twerker to "bend your knees because you want to,/ not for any god or dirty nails in your shoulder" (lines 6-7). The healing we need can be done with our own bodies. We can "wait for whatever/ kind of salvation a basement brings. twerk/ & ain't that the best prayer?" (lines 10-12). If the Black body is its own god that regenerates and reincarnates, then a misbehaving lover is a small trial. The speaker tells the lover to have their things packed and gone "by the time the sun soars in your honor. honey, you're here/ & that's its own psalm. don't let nobody look at you/ & not know they looking at the risen" (lines 15-17). The sun rises to honor the Black body which is also the risen sun, or Son, or every god. In a dance, over a bass beat, in Black community, "this how you write/ free all over your bones" (lines 18-19).

In "summer, somewhere," the poet clearly differentiates some readers from the subject of their poems: "you are not welcome here. trust/ the trip will kill you. go home" (part 20, lines 1-2). They delineate an in-group: "we earned this paradise/ by a death we didn't deserve" (lines 3-4). The poet even places the Black boy on a different spot than the Black girl: "i'm sure there are other heres./ a somewhere for every kind/ of somebody, a heaven of brown/ girls braiding on golden stoops" (lines 5-8). They are clear about the specificity of the guestlist just like their work is consistently clear about the dangers and beauties of presenting male. The dead black *boy*'s body reincarnates as a ghost or a god. So many of Smith's poems could be critiqued as antithetical to Woubshet's ideas, but almost just as many tick off days on the calendar of loss and engage in lyric or insurgent mourning. The Negro spirituals Woubshet highlights are the same as the Black AIDS poems of Dixon and the same as Smith's contemporary backlash against police violence because they all exist on a communal continuum. They are not just similar. They are echoes of the same insurgent mourning. Thankfully, Smith does not leave us in the mourning. They teach us how to heal ourselves like the gods we are, all while putting on a good show.

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Conclusion

A Further Note on Danez Smith

On my first reading of Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*, I wrote in the margin of "dinosaurs in the hood": Smith is the introductory Black poet of my dreams. I mean several things with that statement: 1) Smith's work is introductory in that it forms a bridge between young readers who listen to hip hop and have never read Chaucer (as one potential Old English example of many) and millennial and Generation X readers who grew up as hip hop was being created and were forced to read Chaucer. For as much as Smith uses the n-word, references popular music and culture, they also invoke "ebon seraphs," the Greek myths about the city of Troy, and Biblical imagery. The fact that studies in American letters pretend to be unaware of—and it greatly impacts the honesty with which we critique literature written in the last twenty years—is that certain images and allusions that used to be standard and archetypal are now niche. The only people who are familiar with them are those who studied advanced literature curricula and those who study literature at university. Smith, in my opinion, toes the line perfectly between the niche group to which they professionally belong and the regular readers and audiences for whom they perform on stage and to whom they sell books. Many will disagree with me for the same reasons the poets of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) received pushback for being too simple. We are all entitled to our opinions, but my lived educational experience as both student and teacher undergirds my opinion. Dismissing this type of poetry as too simple to be sophisticated or intelligent does nothing for the genre and craft except make people believe that poetry on the whole is boring. 2) The way Smith displays their Blackness unapologetically is, in my opinion, the most exciting and entertaining display I have read. As is logical, there are places where Smith's aggression goes too far, but if it did not ever go too far, it would certainly not go far enough. And in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century, to see a reemergence of nearly antagonistic Black pride is most refreshing. 3) To see that unwieldy Black pride cloaked in a mastery of language, culture, and humor and showcased through engaging poems that can be read and heard live is a great honor.

A Historic and Diasporic Contextualization

In 1948, when the work of Negritude had just begun, it seemed beneficial at first to have Jean-Paul Sartre write "Black Orpheus" as the preface to a Black French anthology. In the preface, as Diagne criticizes, Sartre called Negritude "The revolutionary poetry of our times… Sartre presented Negritude as the insurgency of black subjectivity, as the poetic voice of black emancipation.… Negritude, according to Sartre, who labeled it as an 'anti-racist racism,' was once and forever the understandably essentialist and racialist answer to colonial essentialization, othering, and racism" (Diagne 122). While Sartre's assessment is not fully incorrect, it misunderstands and lacks the nuance of lived experience. Here is a perfect example of why expertise in the aesthetic does not necessarily translate to adequate critique of the aesthetic entrenched in a historically oppressed culture.

As a consumer and student of the literary arts, I am deeply interested in the similarities between the perspective of an American Descendant of Slavery (ADOS) and the perspective of a millennial first generation African immigrant to the United States. I am equally interested in the plurality of the similarities and differences both of these representations of people have with an ADOS person living in Europe or an African person who attended Oxford and stayed in London. In a discussion about literary genres and literary traditions, we have a way toward a better understanding by including the entire Black Disapora—those who came unwillingly through the "Door" and have yet to return through the "portal," those who have returned through the portal and are pursuing transcendence of the "racial imaginary," and those who remained on the Door's other side in Africa. All of these groups contain writers and artists who have access to and make use of identifiably Black topics, ideas, vernaculars, symbols, motifs, and archetypes. Critics have analyzed these elements regardless of race since the dawn. The task Hoyt Fuller and Toni Morrison call us to (though their calls are phrased differently) is to compare the symbolic depth of Ellison to other Black novelists, rather than to the arbitrary standard of white writers, like perhaps Melville. We ought to analyze the effectiveness of Hurston's Black English to that of other Black fictionalists, rather than the obvious white canonical choices, like Mark Twain. Both Fuller and Morrison want trained critics and teachers of literature and masters of the writing craft. Fuller is a bit more

dedicated to keeping it Black exclusively while Morrison wants Black writers given equality with non-Black and compared apples to apples on literary merit. Her work displays a belief that Black work will raise the inclusive standard. Fuller's work, on and off the page, proves he wants us to create our own exclusive standard. In it, Sam Selvon and Danez Smith get the earned literary attention and groups of Black critics await the release of books like Micaiah Johnson's so that they can join the rich, old conversation about Black aesthetics.

My thesis is interested in the literary history of all people with Black skin, wherever we were or are in location. The study of literature in English gets confused when we only look to the places where native and original speakers of English lived. When England was attempting to create an empire bigger than the Greeks or Romans, they colonized and spread their language all over the world. Therefore, writers in English are not only the British and their historical colonies. Millions of Africans remained in Africa, which was colonized by the British and French. This resulted in African people speaking and writing both their tribal languages and the languages of their colonizers. They wrote histories and fiction, and with the prevalence of commercial ships, the invention and popularizations of airplanes and the creation and infiltration of the internet, the stories of Africa reached the disconnected descendants in the Americas. The study of literature written in English (or any European language) should have always included Africans, Caribbeans, Latines, and American Black authors. Where it did not, this was a fault of the critics, not due to an absence of writers. This all seems very obvious to me, but it is not obvious in the theories that discuss American letters. To this day, Black people whose ancestors are from nearly every region on the planet travel to, live in, write from, and are published in the United States. But our critical lens is not wide enough to encompass them all.

A Note on Black Linguists and John McWhorter

Similar to my chapter footnote on Michael Eric Dyson, I cannot vouch for the entirety of John McWhorter's life work. I understand, appreciate, and enjoy his podcasts about linguistics and I have read *Talking Back Talking Black* cover to cover. If my preliminary research serves me, he was alone in his

field at certain points and the only Black person. I know for certain that I am skeptical of all of the ideologies behind his political book *Woke Racism*. For now, I consider myself to be a fan of his linguistic work and a skeptic if not antagonist of his political work.

I greatly respect the work of linguists Sunn m'Cheaux (a Harvard professor) and E.K. Powell as well. Unfortunately, they have yet to publish, so it is more difficult to find the correct video in hundreds that they have created and cite from it. I encourage those interested in Black linguistics to follow the work of all three.

From Where We Were to Where We're Going

The work of this thesis began with a reading of *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon, where it becomes immediately obvious that Selvon subverts linguistic and structural norms: a fact which may cause a dissonance from the contextualization of the novel within the traditions of British literature. This discordant series of thoughts come into tune when there is a recalibration toward a tradition of literature written in an English-based language, pidgin, or creole. This linguistics phenomenon is analyzed in chapter one through examination of Selvon's grammar, diction, and varied points of view which lend critical place to the overarching idea of Black diasporic multivocity. It is from a place of in-group rhetorical comfort and familiarity that the Black diasporic reader and critic has more unfettered access to Selvon's linguistic games: tall tales, hyperbole, and "oldtalking." Selvon's text even signifies the idea of having and respecting elders and brings to mind other Black and African cultural concepts like the presence of a djeli in the community "to preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people."

The layers of my argument culminate in a look at where we were linguistically at the time of the novel's publication, when Selvon needed the "European reader's complicity" and where we are now (Basu 77). Currently scholars like myself can simply study the mastery of aesthetic language Selvon possessed. I assert that perhaps all Selvon wanted to accomplish may have simply been allowance into the cultural history, a seat at the table as djeli alongside bards like Chaucer and Shakespeare and all historical

fiction. This is pertinent to the entire discourse of Black British writers especially to the extent that they attempt to distance themselves from their birth nationalities and unite under Black Englishness or the Black diaspora. While I would not request the majority of novels be written in pidgin or vernacular, the addition of those into popular circulation normalizes Black creole languages and our multivocity.

In the second chapter, I study the way some sought to refine the term “Afrofuturism,” after Mark Dery in 1993, and develop a literary tradition under it, others began coining new terms. I choose some scholars on whom to pin my points of clarity, and the remaining questions concern the new realities of authors who have multiple Black identities and some who have found Blackness to be a limitation. Michael Eric Dyson, a leader in the field of Black studies, wrote the introduction to *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?* that summarized the tension of post Blackness. Dyson understands the worry that our submission to “the plural pronoun we” (xiv) traps us and how Black postracial writers and artists have cast off the idea of a collective in fear of its limitations (xv).

Through the lens of Danez Smith’s 2014 poem “dinosaurs in the hood” applied as theory, Micaiah Johnson’s novel, I think, is a near perfect depiction of the place Black-literature-as-a-reflection-of-Black-life is in currently. It neither dismisses nor disrespects the old perspectives and the elders that carry them. Neither is it so dedicated to outdated ideologies that it ignores the world’s progress. It masterfully connected to potential but unrealized breakthroughs in technology. Unlike Dyson, Danez Smith demands our Blackness be fully retained and embodied while the impact of the historical pain and othering is simultaneously destabilized.

One reason I contend with Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* in this chapter is because I hope to always be known as a clear and consistent advocate for trusting Black voices. I would not advocate for replacing it in the canon because I want to see more literary studies of slavery through the lens of Black people. If one wants to understand the social landscape of the United States in the 1800s, I think they would do just as well to read *Kindred* and *The Water Dancer* as *Moby Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Chapter three then looks closely at many other poems of Danez Smith and how their work epitomizes the transformation from insurgent mourning to “resilience and glamour” (Velasco p. 12).

Dagmawi Woubshet writes about poems of mourning including Negro Spirituals and the way poems written during the AIDS epidemic exemplify the attributes of lyric poems and elegies. I analyze and apply what Woubshet calls “self-elegizing” and not how Smith breaks out of that boundary as well.

For the Black Future

Hoyt Fuller tells us “Black critics have the responsibility of approaching the works of black writers assuming these [positive] qualities to be present, and with the knowledge that white readers — and white critics— cannot be expected to recognize and to empathize with the subtleties and significance of black style and technique” (“Towards a Black Aesthetic” 156). Throughout the last fifty or more years, many changes have occurred within the literary establishment at large. Readership habits have changed. The university attendance statistics have morphed. The relationship between the Academy and the business world of book-making and book sales has fractured. The Academy no longer makes the sole decision about which literature is good enough. Mainstream society's ideas of good writing are often completely devoid of institutional academic influence and yet the Academy has remained an insular place that does not allow its discoveries and ideas to be accessed by those who have not paid tuition. I wonder if Fuller’s and Baraka’s ideas of a simultaneous and largely independent Black establishment might not be the place where the Black Academy and the mainstream can meet in the middle for the benefit of the Black student, the Black aesthetician, and the Black community. Non-Black people can equally benefit greatly from a reconnection between their Academy and their mainstream publishing. Perhaps they could even combine forces with postracialists for diversity. I would encourage BIPOC who subscribe to postracial ideals but also balk at this suggestion to ask themselves what community they really want to be a part of. Were a reconvening like Hoyt Fuller and Toni Morrison suggest to occur in a formalized, institutionalized way, we must heed Evie Shockley’s warning about intersectionality: “scholars and critics of poetic traditions that include or overlap with African-American poetry need to be aware of the breadth of ways that ‘blackness’ or racial politics may manifest itself in work by African-American poets“ (Shockley 196). Black people must become and remain equally aware.

I am reminded of the words of acclaimed poet Langston Hughes:

"I, too, sing America.

I am a darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

and eat well,

and grow strong. Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me, "eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

and be ashamed—

I, too, am America"

(Hughes 12).

History has for so long sent Black people and the realities of Black life and pain — even as they are cloaked in our artistic expression— to "the kitchen" to hide us away from "company." Now, instead of being forced to remain in a kitchen of exile in a home we were forced to, we ought to be not only allowed but also encouraged to build our own "homes" where we can "eat and grow" strong and be beautiful without any company to offend.

I am in pursuit of literary theory that grounds itself in the understanding that Black literature is a long continuum. I want critics who have the background knowledge to notice that Smith sounds, in many places, like Dixon. But I want that connection to happen outside of the context of the calamity acted out

on their bodies by HIV. I want it to be because they come from the same literary tradition. I want to consider the ways in which Smith's disdainful treatment of the subject of the United States in their work is actually very similar to Selvon's characters' vacillation between unhappiness in London and obsession with it. I do not think I am the only Black scholar with this historical context of Black literature in my mind. I think the trajectory is one of many things that is known but not systematically recorded. I do not see any valid barriers to a quicker and more diverse citation and review process that is more inclusive of voices outside of the mainstream white Academy.

I want my work to help promote and revitalize a culture of reading, writing, performing, and teaching Black texts. My desire is equal parts informed by our elders in the literary movements and motivated by the kindergarteners who may be statistically more likely, especially in the political climate of 2022, to hear a hip hop song in the classroom than to read a book by or about a Black person. As an educator, I am always leveraging language and cultural capital of high interest for young people in order to introduce them to the glamour of Black aesthetics. Educators at every level are not as progressive as we would like to believe if we do not also show social and cultural critics with racialized ideologies that Black poets and authors have an incredibly extensive and well-balanced literary history. It was simply ignored by the dominant culture for being too hard to understand or too risqué. I hope that in my future writings, my work will help teachers, especially Black teachers, develop their thoughts and curriculum plans on teaching to a diverse student population or seeking employment in Black spaces where we have the safety to unpack our own literary history. I hope my work reminds Black writers that we are the continuation in a centuries' long line and helps us consider which subcategory of Black literature we want to be placed in. I hope these pages inspire more reading of, online video watching of, and live performance attendance for contemporary Black poets whose work is written off as lacking depth and interest. I hope that for each poem I reviewed, you read three more.

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