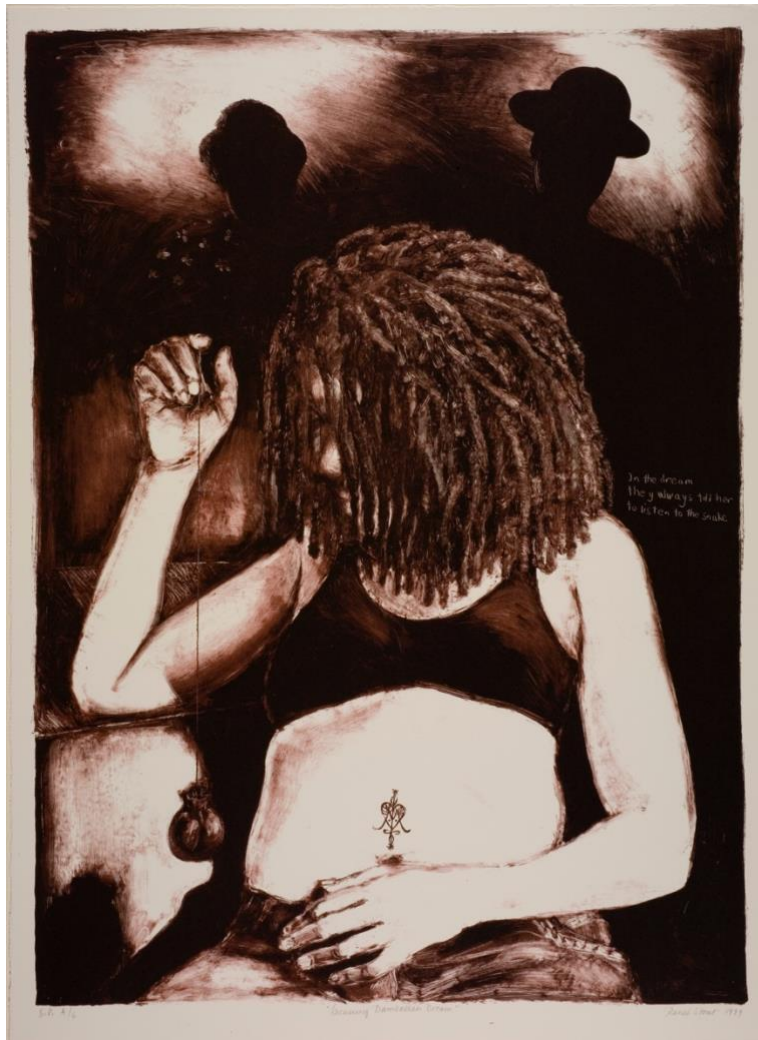


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Visual Art and Fashion as Part of an English Department's Afrofuturism Syllabus

by Giselle Anatol



RENÉE STOUT. RECURRING DAMBALLAH DREAM. SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, GIFT OF JOE AND BARB ZANATTA, 2002.0088

W I have taught several incarnations of *Black Speculative Fiction* at the University of Kansas, always excited to introduce a new group of students—from first-year undergraduates to advanced graduate students—to this rich and provocative body of work. As a child of the 1970s and teenager of the 1980s, I had a very narrow understanding of science fiction and fantasy based on the books recommended to me by friends, teachers, and librarians in my suburban New Jersey town. I recall my voracious consumption of texts like L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* and *The Martian Chronicles* before finding more women writers like Madeleine L'Engle (author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, among others), including Lois Duncan (*Down a Dark Hall*, *Summer of Fear*, *Stranger with My Face*, *Daughters of Eve*, *Killing Mr. Griffin*, etc.). While L'Engle and Duncan shifted the framework to center the experiences and perspectives of young women, the majority of their characters were white. They didn't reflect my experiences as a brown-skinned subject, or a person of Trinidadian heritage, or the daughter of immigrants. They presented worlds—even when those worlds were out of this one—that seemed firmly ensconced in a white British and Euro-American point of view. My past was invisible; my present—both my individual encounters with the world and my very presence as a reader—was unacknowledged; my future seemed ambiguous, if not nonexistent—even in my own imagination.

Twenty years later, the course I designed challenged this view of the field, its writers, and its readers, countering the Black erasure I had long witnessed in the U.S. educational system and publishing industry. Thirty years after I first recognized the dearth of diversity in the readings of my own childhood, many of my students reported similar experiences in their formal education and quotidian experiences. KU, the state's flagship university, is located in the town of Lawrence in eastern Kansas, less than an hour away from Kansas City, Missouri. Some students attend from small rural communities in the western part of the state, but a large number come from middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs in the Kansas City area, as well as St. Louis, Chicago, and various parts of the U.S. Currently, of approximately 17,000 undergraduates, about 71% identify as white; 8½% as Hispanic; 5% as Asian; 5% as multiracial or multi-ethnic; only 4% as Black or African American; and, even more distressingly, only .3% of the undergraduate student population identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native ("KU Racial/Ethnic Diversity"). The English Department draws one of the highest numbers of majors across the university, but not at rates matching the demographics of the campus at large. In my Fall 2020 incarnation of *Black Speculative Fiction*, for example, seventeen of the eighteen undergraduate enrollees appeared phenotypically white (although, when I taught the course in Fall 2018 as a mixed grad/undergrad offering, seven of the sixteen enrolled students were of color). Of the Fall 2020 cohort, one of them I never saw—he did not have a working camera for Zoom sessions—and one distinguished herself as biracial, of African descent, in email correspondence near the end of the term. We were also joined by an African American graduate student from the

Visual Arts Department for all of our discussions. At the start of that term, some of them had heard of Samuel Delaney or read an Octavia Butler novel, but most were unaware of any non-mimetic fiction by authors of the African diaspora. Dozens had read a single slave narrative, and a few had been taught one of Toni Morrison's works—particularly if they took a high school Advanced Placement (AP) English class—but Afrofuturism was an unfamiliar word. This persistent lacuna in students' exposure severely limits their understanding of people from the African diaspora—as active subjects, as diverse communities, as beings imagining a host of possibilities and striving for speculative futures.

Focusing on "texts"—written works, folktales, film, songs, and visual art—by creators of African descent who contemplate social issues, the workings of time, and their presence in a variety of spaces and places, I encourage students to consider how the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism allows artists to question the realities and "logics" established by colonial regimes, neo-colonial powers, systemic racism, and other imbalances in contemporary legal, social, and political structures. We consider how the selected works explore the ways that the past permeates the present; how they envision the possibilities of Africanist existence in the future; how they represent concepts like the posthuman, the cyborg, and the monstrous; in short, how intersections of gender, class, and race play into reconfigurations of a genre long dominated by white men.

While the majority of texts selected for the class are novels and short fiction, I also incorporate film and a project on the visual arts to highlight how themes traverse era and genre and how attention to details and interpretative skills can be applied to a variety of forms. Images in film, paintings, sketches, and sculpture can drive ideas home in ways that words on the page sometimes do not, prompting visceral reactions and the desire to enact change instead of abstracted analysis. Non-verbal art also inspires some students to be more creative with their research projects, thinking "outside the box"—bending and crossing boundaries in an Afrofuturistic mode as opposed to a mimetic one—to fashion thoughtful work that is critical but does not take the form of the conventional academic essay.

The creative option for the final assignment works especially well in the 500-level version of the class, offered for junior and senior English majors as a capstone course. Students at this level of study are tasked to gain or refine the ability to integrate knowledge and think creatively as one of the overarching goals of these English Department courses. When students are permitted to submit an original creative work accompanied by an Artist's Statement—one grounded in substantial research, analysis of the work produced, and reflections on class discussions and assigned readings that relate to the development project—they can demonstrate this integration of knowledge and the ability to think across coursework, disciplines, and academic and non-academic experiences quite skillfully.

In my essay for this special issue of *Radical Teacher*, I begin with a description of the "Mini-Art Galleries" assignment that prepares students for more creative

thinking in their final projects. I have chosen to highlight the development of one student's essay and critical thinking skills, particularly for her topic's relevance to thinking about health and wellness in marginalized communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. I then turn to a discussion of the four creative projects submitted by undergraduates in Fall 2020: a drawing, a collage, a painting, and a doll-sized costume. I excerpt from the students' self-analyses and supplement their discussions with a few reflections of my own—especially when those reflections held particular resonance for teaching in the time of the coronavirus.

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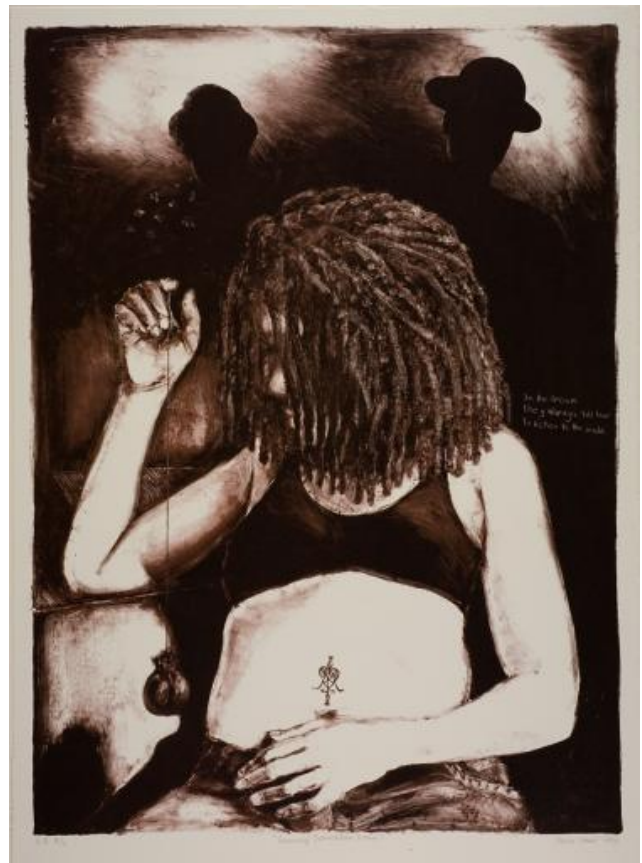
In non-COVID years, I take classes to KU's Spencer Museum of Art to explore its rich holdings and demonstrate how certain works can allow one to consider course themes from different perspectives. To adapt the assignment for remote teaching, I worked with curator Celka Straughn to gather images of a wide assortment of pieces that reflect upon and speculate about concepts such as utopias, the future, extra-planetary travel, "advanced" technologies, and ghosts and hauntings. The artists came from a range of time periods and cultures, and many (but not all) employed an Afrofuturist aesthetic. I arranged students in groups based upon initial indications of "favorite" works, and the groups met independently to create digital mini galleries: four to five images related to a central idea. Students were required to articulate the principle that guided their selections on the first slide of a PowerPoint, and each slide that followed featured a single piece of art, the tombstone (artist, title of work, date), and a sentence or two about how that particular work related to the others in the mini gallery. PowerPoints were presented via Zoom and then put on display on the electronic discussion board for the rest of the class to browse and make comments.

I anticipated that students would gain confidence in their ability to analyze visual texts by working in a group, with each individual contributing initial reactions, offering observations about different details, and generating ideas about the effects and possible significance of those details. I encouraged students to think about dissecting each piece of art in many of the same ways they probed details on the written page (or on the screen when we discussed film as a class). I also recommended that they work collectively and discuss each piece together, not allocating the analysis of each work to a different student. This part of the assignment was crucial for developing the collaborative spirit of the project, where students interacted with and taught each other—especially important during the pandemic when many people felt lonely and isolated. It also prepared them for composing individual analytical essays.

ELIZABETH GRINAGE

In earlier conversations with Grinage, I learned about her love of poetry, and when she came to office hours expressing some anxiety about the individual essay, I urged her to think about her chosen piece of art like she would a lyric poem. While narrative poems, such as ballads and epics, might recount a story with a plot, lyric poems communicate mood, a set of emotions, and/or a state of

mind. Instead of focusing on the denotations and connotations of specific words, I asked her to contemplate how the artist conveyed images and used visual elements—colors, textures, shadows and light, angles and curves, bold strokes vs. feathery lines, space—to evoke particular feelings and reactions. Prompted by a few terms to help guide her search ("vévé," "mojo," "gris gris bag," "hoodoo bag"), Grinage set off to conduct some research and wrote an excellent paper connecting the work of African American visual artist Renée Stout to Afrofuturist conceptualizations of a holistic sense of self: one that allows for the healthy integration of body, mind, and spirit, and past, present, and future. She had selected a lithograph entitled *Recurring Damballah Dream*, weaving her interpretation of it together with an analysis of African diasporic religious and curative practices depicted in the novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992) by Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé. Grinage argued for U.S. Hoodoo, Caribbean Vodun, and other conjure systems as "complex and unique traditions" that provide not only spiritual guidance and protection, but personal empowerment, healing, and other restorative treatments.



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Reading Grinage's essay helped me, in turn, to clarify some of the foundational questions for a class I was designing for the following semester: *Marginalized Bodies, Illness, and "Medicine" in Literature*. This interdisciplinary course was initially conceived as a way to get more pre-medical students into English classrooms, but became powerfully topical when the pandemic illuminated the

disproportionate impact of certain diseases on the lives of those who live on the “margins” of society. The materials selected—including a few texts from *Black Speculative Fiction*—illustrated several of the themes that Grinage had addressed in her essay: varying definitions of “medicine”; best (and worst) practices for physicians and other healthcare practitioners who favor Western procedures over—and often disparage—folk traditions; bifurcations and tensions between spirituality and science; how disparities like employment opportunities, educational access, housing standards, geographical region, cultural and linguistic bias, racism, and sexism can affect access to adequate care—both physical and mental.

I enjoy teaching Condé’s novel in a variety of courses because it so skillfully pushes readers away from easy categorizations of Vodun practices as about satanic worship, and from classifying references to spirits and witchcraft as solely “magical realism” or “fantasy.” In other words, it rejects colonial hierarchies, refusing to “other” Caribbean cultural practices and beliefs, and brings marginalized subjects from the alleged Periphery to the Center. As Haitian/American writer Edwidge Danticat has claimed, “If things seem out of the ordinary, it is not magical realism, but something that has been in our realities. We wrestle with a shifting reality” (Dance 381). Condé’s project, blending alternative spiritualities, anti-colonial rhetoric, historical fiction, and conventions of the slave narrative, effectively defies easy classification and challenges Western logics of time and reality, making her novel ideal for a class on Afrofuturism.

Grinage extended conversations from class to explore specific depictions of root work and healing in the novel. She noted the ways the character of Mama Yaya teaches Tituba about herbal treatments for a variety of maladies—bark, flowers, roots, and other organic materials serve medicinal purposes, but also maintain law and order in the Barbadian community of enslaved people near which they live. Citing the natural cures “for inducing sleep. Those for healing wounds and ulcers. Those for loosening the tongues of thieves” (Condé 9), Grinage asserted that, rather than presenting such practices as “backwards” superstitions, the book illustrates the superior knowledge of the Black women characters. She showed how these ethnobotanical treatments achieve greater success than those applied by the formally trained, European, male doctors in the narrative. The paper has tremendous relevance for the COVID-19 era: while some contemporary readers might attribute Hoodoo and root medicine to an insufficient education and the superstitious or “backward” behaviors associated with the poor, the pandemic has underscored that deficient access to formalized medical care is an integral part of the equation. Around the Caribbean, where naturopathic therapies have survived since slavery, scant supplies and an imperfect infrastructure meant limited numbers of hospital beds and ventilators, low oxygen stores, and uncertain access to vaccines for the first year of the crisis. Haitian residents turned to folk medicines such as ginger and galanga (sometimes called “Little John” or “Low John” by U.S. Hoodoo practitioners), aloe, and cloves to effectively treat some COVID-19 symptoms. This was not simply the desperation born of worldwide panic: a 2007

survey in Barbados revealed that over ninety plant species were utilized in the pharmacopoeia of rural communities, including “cooling teas” that possessed measurable levels of “bioactive” properties, such as being “antioxidative, antihypertensive, anti-inflammatory, antiproliferative, and anti-thrombogenic” (Peter 286). Hindrances to medical access are just as much of a reality for certain populations in the United States of 2020 and 2021 as they are in the so-called “third world,” making them more vulnerable than others to the dire consequences of infection.

Rather than adhering to Western conceptions of future-facing “progress,” Condé’s novel and Stout’s lithograph exemplify the power of African-diasporic women who symbolically face both backwards, into their cultural past, and forwards, into their oncoming futures. Refusing to adhere to a linear timeline enables Afrofuturist subjects to access robust, productive prospects, rather than being denied a promising future. This idea generated much hope among the students in the class—crucial during the despair engendered by the pandemic and ensuing lockdown.

KATE SCHWALLER

As an aficionado of young adult fiction, undergraduate Kate Schwaller found herself drawn to Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch* (2011) and its representation of protagonist Sunny Nwazue’s struggles with fitting in—a prominent theme of this body of work. She noted, “I also often felt out of place and separated from others when I was younger. I struggled quite a bit to find a place I felt I truly fit in, so I related deeply to that aspect of Sunny’s character.” Okorafor’s tackling of the topics of alienation and isolation, found in many other works in the Afrofuturist mode, made the novel even more compelling for teaching during the COVID lockdowns of 2020, when students frequently felt isolated from family, friends, and each other.

Notably, Schwaller’s art piece enabled her to push beyond a simplistic reduction of *Akata Witch* to a universalist case of disaffection. She expressed delight with the author’s description of the magical community as “leopard people,” indicating that the name was especially thought-provoking in a narrative about combatting isolation since, besides being powerful and feared, leopards are incredibly solitary animals. She furthered her critical analysis by considering complex definitions of racial identity and colorism. By doing so, Schwaller met the course goal of being able to identify major cultural and political concerns of artists of African descent who employ speculative genres to express themselves. *Akata Witch* engages in intricate world building for the magical “leopard people” that Sunny encounters, but must also weave an urban Nigerian worldscape for Western readers for whom the word “Africa” signifies only mud huts and safaris.

Schwaller began: “In my art piece, [...] I placed Sunny in the center to highlight her place as both the main character in the novel and the [...] focus of the artwork itself.”



ARTWORK BY KATE SCHWALLER. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

She chose not to include any other distinct characters in the drawing in order to emphasize Sunny's feelings of estrangement. At the novel's opening, the protagonist has just moved to Africa after being raised in the U.S. by her Nigerian parents; despite a common culture, she is identified as an outsider by her classmates. Additionally, she is mocked by her brown-skinned adolescent peers for being albino. Even among those with magical abilities, she feels alienated: as a "free agent" she is pitied for not growing up with knowledge of her magical roots, powers, and future potential.

Schwaller decided to draw the leopard's head just below Sunny's instead of side-by-side, further symbolizing Sunny's isolation. For her, the leopard represents Sunny herself and not a companion. She noted that the similarity in size and shape between the two heads signifies how Sunny "finally found her place among the Leopard People, and what that means for her": belonging and acceptance within the magical community. The artistic choice to make both figures look directly out at the viewer alludes to Sunny's confidence in her abilities by the end of the narrative.

The nsibidi marks on Sunny's face are one of Schwaller's creative innovations, not a part of Okorafor's text. They indicate an essential part of her identity—very much like a leopard's spots. This choice reflected one of goals of KU English courses that serve as capstones: the ability to think critically, but also work in imaginative ways that produce innovative expressions and original perspectives. In the novel, Okorafor sprinkles the nsibidi symbols throughout the chapters as keys to the leopard people's written language:

one that stands in sharp opposition to the colonizing language of English. Schwaller's placement of them on Sunny's face draws attention to the protagonist as possessing a type of embodied knowledge, shifting the focus away from conventional academic knowledge and the archives of written documents valued in European traditions. This shift is a key aspect of many Afrofuturist texts; one only need think of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), in which protagonist Hiram Walker realigns his early obsession with Eurocentric standards to pull from an otherworldly inner power in service of the Underground.

Schwaller used pen, markers, and colored pencils on paper, selecting alcohol-based markers for Sunny and the leopard and colored pencils for background. The bright, vivid colors of the markers made the girl and leopard stand out from the muted tones and softer shading of the backdrop. Schwaller described wanting to create an effect that made Sunny and the leopard more vibrant, attractive, and three-dimensional to the viewer, counter to the protagonist's initial failure to value her difference from the larger community. Outlining the heads with thick black marker further separated them from the rest of the page, effectively highlighting the protagonist's sense of isolation as the novel begins. Those thick black lines made me reflect differently upon some of the strategies I had employed for teaching in the time of the coronavirus: Zoom technology, for instance, was embraced for its potential to give students and instructors greater access to each other despite stay-at-home orders; students could see their peers' faces and expressions and hear their voices, even if tuning in from an isolated apartment. The squares around each Zoom participant's face, however, sometimes functioned much like Schwaller's outlines: deceptively difficult to breach. The energy of the classroom space, the ability to "read the room" and interpret body language as well as facial expressions were lost in the virtual landscape.

The idea of a deceptively simple image also came through in Schwaller's artwork in the rounded background shapes, which I initially took for leopard spots. Closer inspection reveals that they are actually heads, representing the communities with whom Sunny does not fit, "whether due to her Albinism, her Nigerian heritage when she is in the United States, her American upbringing when she is in Nigeria, or her magical powers." Schwaller rendered these background faces in varying skin tones, suggesting the diversity of African phenotypes. Her Artist's Statement called attention to the fact that these heads were smaller than Sunny's and the leopard's, and "do not have defining characteristics such as eyes, noses, or mouths. This creates a sense of uniformity among the background faces," allowing the viewer to recognize Sunny and the leopard as truly distinct and "literally larger than life."

TALI HECKER

Undergraduate Tali Hecker decided to capture the religious elements of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993); she was captivated by the spiritual growth of protagonist Lauren Olamina, an African American teenager, over the course of the novel and her ability to appreciate the nature and necessity of change. While the novel unnerved many

students in the course with its disturbingly accurate, dystopian portraits of U.S. social and political turbulence in the mid-2020s, the concept of embracing change for physical, emotional, and psychological survival provided a framework for enduring the uncertainties of the pandemic.

Hecker chose to convert the verses of the "Earthseed" religion into images, conveying "a world beyond words" through "a world of symbolism." She aimed to illustrate Change as power and as necessity, evidenced by the cycles of life, death, and rebirth on the planet Earth; she also wanted to extend notions of life beyond the organic, arguing, "[C]oncepts such as oppressive governance, especially when rooted in a form of capitalism that privileges individuals instead of communities and exploits the weak, also must die and transform." She was especially eager to capture the paradoxical nature of change as a process that is simultaneously dynamic, unpredictable, and constant. When teaching the course again, I may require all students to participate in a creative adaptation of the Earthseed verses; meditating on them provided Hecker with comfort and hope near the end of the semester, when so many of my students stopped coming to class, overwhelmed by the pressures of lockdown, media reports of rising numbers of COVID19 cases and deaths, and their inability to motivate themselves to focus on their assignments and articulate their thoughts in writing.



ARTWORK BY TALI HECKER. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Butler's protagonist contemplates the meaning of change in her diaries and journals throughout the novel. Hecker was moved by the beauty and emotional reassurance evoked by passages such as this:

God is Change—
Seed to tree,
tree to forest;

Rain to river,
river to sea;
Grubs to bees,
bees to swarm. (315)

One of the central images in her collage is that of the phoenix. The words "the cycle of the phoenix" are not as large as the word "FUTURE," but appear clearly in black and white near the bottom of the artwork. Hecker observed that the mythical bird might be interpreted as a symbol of radical change, from egg/birth to beautiful bird to life-consuming flames and then ashes, where nothing seems to remain. However, despite people's fear of change and attempts to hold onto sameness, the phoenix reveals a certain reliability—a steadiness—a cycle that occurs again and again. Hecker quoted Lauren's words: "In order to rise / From its own ashes / A phoenix / First / Must / Burn" (153). She sought to convey the idea of ascension or transcendence in the collage through multiple images of birds, butterflies, and other things that take flight or exist in the sky, such as stars and lightning.

Hecker chose the following passage to highlight the notion of change as chaos, this time teasing out connections between change and power:

God is Power --
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent,
And yet, God is Pliable --
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is Change. (25)

She identified the flexibility required to accept the inescapability of change and brought an Afrofuturist element to the discussion in her Artist's Statement by teasing out the trickster reference in Butler's passage. She asserted that, because Anansi the Spider in West African and Caribbean folklore represents a more fluid concept of morality rather than the rigid good-versus-evil binary of European fairy tales, Anansi stories encourage an enjoyment of the dynamics of unpredictability. These tales condition the listener to acquiesce to change instead of resisting it, protecting one's spirit from being broken. She included a web and several spirals to represent the generation of webs in her artwork, urging "ultimate surrender in accepting the uncontrollable, the 'Chaos' with which humanity is spun together" in the universe. Additionally, a pair of hands to the left of the face on the spider web "holds colorful shapes extending into [...] a spiraled pattern, connected to a model of [...] in our galaxy." The hands appear to sculpt the galaxy

with “the power of grace and [...] ability to transform even the roughest of edges.” Much as God created the earth, Lauren sculpts a new community from the people she gathers along her journey, all in the name of a higher power and the spirit of give and take.

For another of the Earthseed verses—“Any Change may bear seeds of benefit [...] Any Change may bear seeds of harm [...] God is infinitely malleable. / God is Change” (116)—Hecker included another pair of hands, “this time covered in soil, mirroring Lauren’s emphasis on seeds, both literal and metaphorical, and the planting that one must partake in [in] order for anything to be harvested.” She incorporated blue sky with butterflies on either side of these hands to signify the immensity of nature and also the unknown. A gray industrial scene just above the hands symbolizes the post-apocalyptic setting of the novel and the harm to the climate sewn by human hands.

At the bottom right of the collage Hecker placed a person, in what she described as “a post-apocalyptic suit,” planting seeds, along with a bit of script reading “shadows inside seeds of democracy.” With these words, she chose to give name to the shadows haunting modern U.S. society: namely, its foundations in slavery. Taking an optimistic perspective, she posed that present-day society can overcome the system of domination in which it was born. “This is where the symbolism of the phoenix comes to play again: in order to create a new paradigm of social change the old system must first burn down and die so another one can rise from its ashes.” Images of burning lava with a body traced in the molten surface symbolize this idea. “At the knee of the first body are the words ‘die and become’—another representation of the phoenix symbolism, further supporting [the idea] that for change to arise there must first be death and dying, as seen throughout the novel and life.”

In class, I stressed the veneration of the communal as an aspect of African cultures around the world; Hecker synthesized her contemplations on change with this concept, quoting a passage about “bees to swarm. / From one, many; / from many, one” (315). In the collage, she used an abundance of trees to mirror these lines and underscore allusions to seeds and growth.

Finally, Hecker connected “being able to metaphorically sit in the chaos” with a sense of self-reliance—much needed in the face of adversity, and especially poignant during the pandemic. However, she recognized that this self-reliance was not entirely self-generated, and rejected a privileging of the self over others, finding corroboration in the verse, “We must find the rest of what we need / within ourselves, / in one another, / in our Destiny” (245). Like Schwaller and Grinage, she identified a respect for different types of teachers, knowledge, and spaces of learning:

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you

or taken from you,
All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you--
If you will learn. (279)

In the collage, she scattered bits of images around a head. In the Artist Statement, she compellingly argued for incorporating various types of information during the educational process—theoretical and experiential, textual and oral—showing a strong understanding of Afrofuturism’s goal of decolonizing knowledge and learning.

Perhaps most productively for upending conventions of time and history, Hecker pasted a picture of a camera lens, intentionally tilted upward and below the word “future,” to suggest Lauren’s desire for humankind to take root among the stars—both physically and in terms of a spiritual ascension to new planes of enlightenment and growth. Significantly, her focus on spiritual transcendence allows a reading of Butler’s novel that does not replicate the colonial impulse to conquer new territories and engage in the process of empire building in new, extra-planetary realms.

FAITH MADDUX

Senior Faith Maddox was also inspired by Butler’s novel as she developed her end-of-semester project. Deeply moved by the repeated depictions of trauma in the assigned readings, she astutely noted in her critical essay that, although the COVID-19 crisis provided opportunities for all citizens of the world to wrestle with trauma and develop greater compassion for others, distress had disturbingly “become a spectacle” during the pandemic, “easily accessible within seconds, spread across every field of media [... and] presented without consent.” She challenged media outlets’ motivation to demonstrate physical evidence of suffering, “as if to say that any form of justice carries a prerequisite of visible pain”; by implication, audiences were being conditioned to ignore emotional suffering and psychological strain despite ample evidence of these tolls on human health during the lockdown. Maddox also critiqued society’s shift to the sound-bite, snapshot, and penchant for headlines instead of complete news stories, connecting the rapid news cycle to a failure to provide “a space where context and healthy emotional processing can coexist.” She posed speculative fiction as a promising vessel through which to take one’s time exploring and coping with trauma, and asserted that speculative fiction by Black women writers was an ideal genre/mode/aesthetic to convey and condemn the ways that systems of oppression like sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia inflict different kinds of violence upon women of African descent than on other members of U.S. society. In the analytical section of the assignment, Maddox thus demonstrated mastery of one of the core class goals: to grasp theoretical principles of African American thought by way of Afrofuturist texts. I view this an an essential aspect of the course, since speculative fiction is sometimes deemed by students (and readers outside the field) as empty of intellectual rigor. Without using the term,

Maddox explicated how *Parable* illuminated the workings of intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the context of late twentieth-century legal scholarship and addressed as far back as Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech and Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

For Maddox, Butler’s novel depicted trauma in powerful ways without leaving readers devastated by the impact. As opposed to the quick flashes of distress featured in media reports, “[t]ranslating trauma into writing provides clarity and context to experiences that [might] otherwise be obscured by emotional processing.” Maddox researched and applied trauma theory, describing how human beings “remember and store trauma as fragments of experience or sensation, instead of a traditional narrative memory [... A]s a result, even verbally narrating what has happened is a challenge” (Smith). Thus, creating a work of art—whether it is a poem or a novel or sculpture or a song—can function as catharsis for those struggling to articulate their emotions and experiences, and *readers* of fiction portraying traumatic events can gain the same “clarity and context” that might be eclipsed or muddied by strong emotional reactions to superficial reports. Maddox theorized that writing in “alternative and experimental” forms—like Afrofuturism—could help to organize thoughts and process material in ways that more conventional genres fail to accomplish.

Maddox additionally posited that elements of Butler’s narrative—the portrait of the protagonist’s hyperempathy, for instance—effectively address the desensitization to violence and trauma that current news and social media reports often foster. She integrated another assigned text from the course—Sami Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined*—for its discussion of the “bodymind,” which “insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern” (Schalk 5). This theory allows traumatic experience to be recognized as an experience of both mind and body, much like racism’s effects on the psyches and physical health of contemporary African American subjects, who suffer higher rates of hypertension than those in the dominant culture. In Butler’s novel, Lauren’s hyperempathy exists in her mind but has physical side effects: witnessing someone with blood on their hands makes Lauren start to bleed before she learns control (Butler 11). The protagonist notes that physicians call her condition “an ‘organic delusional syndrome,’” but “[i]t hurts [physically], that’s all I know” (12). Maddox found this concept compelling for its potential to combat the widespread desensitization existing in the fictional world and the “real” world that she and her peers occupy. Tying this dynamic to contemporary racism and social structures that sustain inequity, Maddox argued that while Lauren’s hyperempathy “might remedy the violence inflicted by both structural exploitation and everyday civilians” on people of color in the present moment, the fact that she must numb herself to the pain of the dystopian world outside the walls of her community illuminates the emotional labor that is constantly expected of Black women—“desensitizing oneself to systemic oppression in order to move through the world, while simultaneously being required to provide constant

empathy for those who inflict the damage of their misguided wrongdoings.” Maddox labelled this intersectional experience of trauma as “both public and personal, upheld by cultural practices that make violence against Black people a spectacle and normalized (unknowingly or not) in everyday conversations between family and friends.”

The painting Maddox created visually incorporated the ways that she saw Afrofuturism serving as a tool for exploring “nuanced experiences” and “alternative ways of perceiving and understanding.” As per the course goals, she absorbed that literature can put everyday realities of oppression into new contexts, providing points of view and important insights to those who may not experience or recognize these realities. Maddox was also able to articulate the ways that visual art offers “a unique modality through which an ordinary viewer can find new ways of [...] connecting” with ideas, since nonverbal forms of expression have the potential to encourage interpretations that might be difficult to pin down in written language or the spoken word.

Maddox’s minimalist artwork allows a focus on the symbolism imperative to a reader’s full comprehension of *Parable*. Several figures on legs encircle two houses and a tree, representative of Lauren’s Robledo, CA home. Abstract and spectral, Maddox wanted them to evoke the hidden forces perpetuating inequities that shape Butler’s dystopic world, resulting in myriad types of trauma. She wrote: “Their ambivalent appearances are reflective of the mind’s tendency to obscure experiences it views as dangerous or



ARTWORK BY FAITH MADDOX. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

that it is unable to fully process.” This line serves as a way of conceptualizing many Afrofuturist narratives: a thrilling plot and seemingly alien landscape, era, or characters can obfuscate the trauma of real-life persecution, rendering it safer to absorb and process before the true meaning becomes clear.

The figures are surrounded by an outer layer of candles, meant to conjure the repeated fire imagery throughout the novel and convey the idea of something that can function as “both an agent of chaos and a vessel for rebirth.” Similarly, the tree at the painting’s center, captured in a surrealist style, resembles fire and flames as well as the literal tree in Lauren’s walled neighborhood, emblematic of the cycles of life that Butler points to with her frequent references to oaks and acorns.

Maddox also painted two brown hands in her piece, which she identified as Lauren’s, “looming over the fire-contained world in a way that mirrors her role as a godlike or prophetic figure. Her hands have the ability to create change, just as they have the potential to alter the positions of various objects within the painting. While they’re indicative of a surreal presence, they’re also the symbol most grounded in reality.” As such, Maddox successfully portrayed the “opposing narratives of detachment and hyperempathy with which Lauren struggles,” and that she must learn to reconcile.

Maddox concluded her Artist’s Statement with praise for the way Afrofuturist fiction can be used to examine all types of pain, offering new perspectives and a deeper understanding of how systemic violence perpetuates trauma. Impassioned by how the works of authors like Octavia Butler exemplify the damage caused by systemic racism and other “vectors of power” (Schalk 62), she focuses her viewer’s attention on the impact that sociopolitical injustices have on African American existence.

ABBI DOUGHERTY

Abbi Dougherty, a Visual Arts major with an emphasis in textiles, was fascinated by the descriptions of clothing in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* (2000)—especially the childhood Carnival costume of the book’s protagonist, Tan-Tan, and her adulthood apparel when taking on the Midnight Robber persona in her day-to-day life. Dougherty desired to create a model of the outfit that accurately mirrors aspects of the Caribbean folk culture from which Hopkinson draws, while also incorporating elements of Tan-Tan’s struggles, journeys, and a sense of the physical environments in the novel. She thus confirmed mastery of the course goal that called for a demonstration of the ability to distinguish variations in African diaspora communities, avoiding the collapsing of all populations into a singular culture and experience. Rather than translating Mardi Gras baubles and beads, excessive alcohol consumption, and loss of inhibition onto a Caribbean landscape, she responded flexibly to multiple worldviews and developed a nuanced depiction involving elements of history, the evolution of cultural practices, and Afrofuturist considerations of Time.

Because of time constraints and her own “limitations when it comes to sewing,” Dougherty decided to create a

single garment and scale it down to doll-size instead of fit for a life-sized model. She envisioned the larger version of the project, however, as an entire series in different sizes, materials, and textures, illustrating Tan-Tan’s development from girlhood to womanhood and a sweeping passage of time, similar to that experienced in time travel narratives like Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. In class, we discussed the flexibility of time and non-linear narratives of many works of speculative fiction from the African diaspora: authors of Yoruba heritage, for example, might refer to the simultaneity of past, present and future, with departed ancestors called to walk among the living in the masquerade / egúngún tradition (*Akata Witch*); characters might anxiously watch out for moments when they could physically walk into a memory of the past (Sethe in *Beloved*); writers might subvert the “rational,” linear notions of time employed in European/Western traditions by having a historical figure from the late 1600s share a jail cell with a character first written about in the nineteenth century who, in turn, speaks of concepts like the feminist separatism of the 1970s (Tituba and Hester Prynne in *I, Tituba*). Multiple costumes existing at once would allow Dougherty to capture Tan-Tan’s essence at different stages of her life, but also suggest a more fluid notion of time and gesture towards elements of time travel.

Dougherty pulled from two of Hopkinson’s descriptions as the foundation for her project. The first: young Tan-Tan’s Jonkanoo costume on the planet of Toussaint:



ARTWORK BY ABBI DOUGHERTY. COURTESY OF AUTHOR

It had a white silk shirt with a high pointy collar, a little black jumbie leather vest with a fringe, all round the bottom, and a pair of wide red leather pants with more fringe down the sides. It even had a double holster go round her waist, with two shiny cap guns sticking out. But the hat was the best part. A wide black sombrero, nearly as big as Tan-Tan herself, with pom poms in different colors all around the brim, to hide her face in the best Robber Queen style. (Hopkinson 27)

Dougherty's rendition included hand-sewn fringed pants and the large black sombrero. She considered the fringe as the most recognizable, and thus essential, detail of her craftsmanship. The hat was made with a piece of cardboard, topped with a bottle cap wrapped in black thread. Her use of "throwaway" items that she found and recycled cleverly invoked the need to consider sustainability in the present to ensure existence in the future. Additionally, she chose to allude to Tan-Tan's future "exile" with her father as she selected other materials; she picked "very durable cotton fabric" for the pants and top since, while "traveling through harsh environments and dense forests, [...] it would be important that her legs be protected from the elements."

The second description from Hopkinson's book was the costume that Melonhead, a tailor and Tan-Tan's future love interest, sews for the protagonist on New Halfway Tree:

He'd pierced together precious ends of black velvet, made style by outlining the joins with iridescent shell buttons. The cape was lined with brightly coloured ribbons, ends left long and fluttering.... [plus] a fine Robber hat from goat wool felt that he'd dyed black and blocked into shape. There was a belt ... with two holsters and sheathes for her knife and machète. (Hopkinson 313)

Dougherty identified the cape and gun holster as crucial elements of this passage. She opted for a simple black cape: "if she were to wear the cape with bright ribbons into the forests, they would get tangled amongst tree branches and other flora that Hopkinson painstakingly describes [...]. Colorful flowing ribbons would not only catch people's notice when she is trying to hide away from the communities, but certainly catch the attention of a predatory mako jumbie bird." I would have loved to see Dougherty consider Hopkinson's attention to other fabric details in the two passages: the "goat wool felt" on the exile planet suggests domesticated animals initially transported from Earth and bred for meat, fur, and pelts, while the "jumbie leather" on Toussaint comes from "genesculpt[ed]" (32) versions of animals—species significantly *not* under human control. The human annihilation of indigenous fauna and destruction of delicate ecosystems serves as a pointed critique of contemporary human behavior.

Dougherty selected a purple sash for the gun holster. Researching color symbology, she noted that purple fabrics often represent "luxury, nobility, and status," and historically could be worn only by those in power: "As scholar Charlene Elliott notes: '[B]y 800–700 BC, the esteem of purple is heralded through the Homeric epics: purple references are associated only with persons of the highest social status' (Elliott 179)." Citing purple robes as markers for members of royal families in Greece, the Roman empire, and Persia, she claimed the color as an appropriate one for Tan-Tan, the daughter of a man who was once an important mayor, and constructed as "my father, Lord Raja, [...] the King of Kings" by the protagonist (Hopkinson 317). These hyperbolic terms match the portrait of Antonio as king of the Taino people in the adapted folktale, "How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief" (78).

Thinking carefully about color, Dougherty also elected to create a yellow shirt instead of a white one for her piece. Tan-Tan claims it as her favorite color, and it is frequently associated with happiness.

Despite the fact that, towards the end of the novel, Tan-Tan states, "Sorrow was my father, my mother. I know sorrow good" (Hopkinson 326), I believe that with the arrival of baby Tubman, with his name signifying her hope for freeing people who are enslaved, joy is about to arrive in Tan-Tan's life. (Dougherty)

This reference to an imminent joy (future) and combination of the childhood costume (past) with Tan-Tan's adult apparel (present) further enmesh principles of non-linear, non-static time into Dougherty's artistic creation.

In a moment when the majority of U.S. high school and college students still associate science fiction with the mid-twentieth-century "Golden Age" of the genre, and their limited classroom exposure leads them to associate the field with white, cis-male writers like Wells, Verne, Bradbury, Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke, and Dick—perhaps even Mary Shelley and Ursula LeGuin—teaching Afrofuturism counters a host of forms of Black erasure: the absence of writers of African descent, complex Black characters, and issues of critical importance to Black communities around the world. My very presence as a brown-skinned professor challenges the erasure of Black readers, enthusiasts, and experts in speculative fiction.

During the peak of the coronavirus epidemic, disparate rates of death and severe illness for African Americans and alarming inconsistencies in the quality of healthcare for different populations could no longer be effaced from the public's awareness. Social media represented one type of outreach, increasing attention to the nation's ills; I would argue that Afrofuturist works represent another type of critical intervention: they have the power to address historical and cultural erasures and to inspire creativity, interdisciplinarity, and change. They can subvert tropes that freeze subjects of African heritage in disempowered pasts, and can provide alternative perspectives of the present and the future in order to—as Nalo Hopkinson so aptly asserts—take up "the meme of colonizing the natives, and, from the experience of the colonize[d], critique it, pervert it, fuck with it" (Burnett 133). The student creations and statements outlined here represent a treasure trove of materials in and of themselves; I look forward to future incarnations of the assignments to give more students outlets for their impressive imaginations and ways to integrate class materials, discussions, and their own research in innovative ways.

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