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Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson’s Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism

The recent nomination of Chuck Tingle’s *Space Raptor Butt Invasion* (2015) for the Hugo Award for best novel by the Sad/Rabid Puppies is an attempt to attack the credibility of the prestigious awards, and it reveals quite a lot about the now years-long right-wing backlash in speculative communities.¹ The Puppies and their supporters are not only protesting the emergence and recognition of writers of color, but are also attempting to ridicule the preeminence of queer and feminist science fiction, both of which they see as a conspiracy, if we are to believe Vox Day’s most recent book-essay *Social Justice Warriors Always Lie: Taking Down the Thought Police* (2015). If nothing else, this reactionary backlash indicates a shift in the audience and market for speculative genres. Fan communities increasingly consume and vote for texts whose protagonists are non-white, queer, women, disabled, engaged in non-monogamous relationships, and so on. The popularity of the *Star Wars* franchise’s new trio of characters, Rey, Finn, and Poe (a white woman, a black man, and a racially-ambiguous, potentially queer man), for example, seems to show that even Hollywood’s multi-billion-dollar science-fiction franchises are adapting to a new market of socially-conscious, if not mainstream-feminist, consumers.

In this context, intersectional critiques of speculative fictions are particularly relevant. A new generation of black women writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Nisi Shawl, Nnedi Okorafor, Tananarive Due, and N.K. Jemisin, among others, are particularly recognized for the ways in which they challenge and transform the tropes, characters, and conventions of speculative genres, notably by featuring women of color as protagonists and by introducing more diverse characters.² Nalo Hopkinson, a queer Caribbean-Canadian writer currently living in the US, is what Jillana Enteen calls an “Afrofuturist visionary” (263), an author whose work profoundly challenges imperialist conceptions of modernity and primitivism, technology and folklore, science and magic, the sacred and sexual, and masculine and feminine. In this essay, I argue for an intersectional approach to Afrofuturism that examines the complex and intricate relationships between race and sexuality, looking specifically into the works of Nalo Hopkinson as an exemplar of a feminist, queer-centered Afrofuturism. To this end I use black queer theory and in particular the work of Rodrick Ferguson and Matt Richardson as a theoretical framework through which to understand the complex intersectionality of Hopkinson’s queer afrofuturist texts. In the first part, I discuss the similarities of Afrofuturism and black queer theory, and the productive potentials of examining race and queerness in speculative contexts. In the second part, I analyze Hopkinson’s

In “Black to the Future” (1993), Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). Since then, an increasing body of Afrofuturist scholarship has emerged and expanded upon Dery’s coinage of the term, particularly in terms of genre spectrum and even medium, as scholars continue to study Afrofuturism from a musical perspective. Given that Afrofuturism profoundly challenges ideas about science, technology, and knowledge, many afrofuturist texts do not fit neatly into the conventions of science fiction and actually borrow from other speculative genres such as fantasy, magical realism, horror, and so on.

In a recent essay, Julia Hoydis argues that the literary tradition of black female writers of speculative fiction that started with Octavia Butler produces a “hybridization of genres.” Hoydis claims that women in Afrofuturism especially are “more concerned with speculation and disturbing notions of reality than with scientific-technological ideas and … they often maintain a concern with history despite a distinctly futurist orientation” (71). Certainly, Hopkinson’s work does not escape such definitions; as Rob Latham puts it:

> critics have been hard-pressed to come up with an adequate critical vocabulary to describe the complex genre-crossing involved in Hopkinson’s work. Is she producing variants of magic realism? Adaptations of the folk tale to technocultural realities? Futuristic fables? The short answer is that she is doing all of these things, and more.

In addition, as Hoydis aptly remarks, “a Hopkinson novel … [typically] features characters of all ethnicities, ages, genders, and sexual orientations” (81).

In his definition of the movement in the *Oxford Companion to Science Fiction*, De Witt Douglas Kilgore writes that “Afrofuturism can be seen as less a marker of black authenticity and more a cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we may imagine” (8). Kilgore’s definition is particularly probing because it underlines the afrofuturist project of contesting the idea of linear time and subsequently subverting the primitivism/modernity binary. Recent works by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek re-examine nineteenth-century novels as afrofuturist; other scholars such as Yatasha L. Womack and Kodwo Eshun argue that the Afrodiaspora was a science-fictional experience. Lonny Avi Brooks suggests such retroactive analysis when he writes that “Afrofuturism as a basic framework suggests promising directions for reinvigorating our language to speak about racial identity in the deep past and the long-term future” (153). Afrofuturist texts subvert images of a post-racial future in which technology and modernism have allowed white people to survive and racialized others to
But they also reclaim historical narratives, particularly traumatic histories such as the African diaspora and US slavery, and play with time and time travel in ways that do not allow for a simple conception of time as linear.

Considering the engagement of afrofuturist texts with histories of racism, slavery, colonialization, and systemic oppression, as well as the position of racialized bodies in stories set in the future, it is crucial to analyze the conjunction of race, gender, and sexuality. In her recent essay “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s Fledging,” Susana Morris argues that Afrofuturism and black feminism share similar preoccupations with resistance to systemic oppression and erasure, so much so that they are “symbiotic” (153). She defines “Afrofuturist feminism” as “a literary tradition in which people of African descent and transgressive, feminist practices born of or from across the Afro diaspora are key to a progressive future.” She writes further that Afrofuturist feminism “offers a critical epistemology that illuminates the working of black speculative fiction in vital ways” (153). Morris applies her theory to the works of Octavia Butler, whom she sees as a prime example of an author whose fiction is both Afrofuturist and profoundly engaged with the concerns at stake in black feminism, namely race, gender, sexuality, and ability (154-55).

In an extension of Morris’s insight, I argue that black queer theory can be usefully applied to Afrofuturism because the black American historical context always already implicates sexuality, often a sexuality deemed abnormal. Like black feminism, black queer theory sheds critical insight on the racialization process that starts with the sexed and sexual body. Moreover, black queer theory, as the work of Ferguson and Richardson shows, is in part an historical project, an effort meant to have repercussions on the present and the future of black sexuality in the US. As such, it shares the afrofuturist objective to subvert linear historical narratives that produce various forms of violence against racialized and/or queer bodies. At the intersection of black queer theory and Afrofuturism lies queer Afrofuturism, a term meant to designate those afrofuturist texts in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality in such a way that it is impossible to talk about one without always already signifying the other. Queer Afrofuturism is not only a useful theoretical concept through which to examine the works of black queer writers such as Nalo Hopkinson; it also illuminates the functions of racial and sexual metaphors in speculative contexts in general. Non-realistic genres, especially those using monstrous creatures, imperialist tropes, the weird, the bizarre, and the fantastic, produce the most probing examples of racial and sexual anxiety. Queer Afrofuturism allows for an intersectional approach to such tensions. The project of black queer studies is to address what Ferguson calls the “racial unconscious” of queer theory (“The Relevance” 112), or the tendency, much critiqued in Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1976) and in Eve Kososky Sedgwick’s multiple volumes about the study of homosexuality (such as Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire [1985], Epistemology of the Closet [1990], and Tendencies [1993]) to define the emergence of modern sexuality within Euro-American narratives of socio-
economic and cultural progress and modernization. In his criticism of historical materialism, Ferguson writes that “the distinction between normative heterosexuality (as the evidence of progress and development) and non-normative gender and sexual practices and identities (as the woeful signs of social lag and dysfunction) has emerged historically from the field of racialized discourse” (Aberrations 6). Currently, the relative equality granted to some queer people, notably with the legalization of same-sex marriage, depends greatly upon gender- and homo-normativity, which are codified as white and middle class. Subsequently, authors who reclaim queerness within black history and cultures subvert a heteronormative narrative that demands gender coherence, heterosexuality, and nuclear family structures. Black queer subjectivity thus offers a potential for alternativity to the paradigm of white normality.

To understand racism and the construction of race from the perspective of sexuality studies becomes relevant because racist discourses are entwined with hetero-patriarchal ideologies. Frantz Fanon already situates the fear of the Negro in the biological—the assumed animality of the black body meant that any number of sexual perversions, deviances, and dangers were inherent in the black body (157). As Fanon argues, Western racism should be seen as a sexual phobia, a fear rooted deeply in both sex and gender. Black queer studies scholars have shown the ways in which both female and male black bodies are constructed as others through ideologies of sexual deviance, non-normativity, dysfunctional families, and hypersexualization. In his fundamental work Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (2004), Ferguson constructs a queer theory based specifically within critical race theory and debunks the idea that race, sexuality, class, and gender are distinct categories. He demonstrates how all major Western politico-economic theories—including nationalism, liberal pluralism, and Marxism—work to perpetually define whiteness, hetero-patriarchy, and heteronormativity as universal, natural, and civilized. Through sexuality, Ferguson argues, the racialization—the process of otherness—of black bodies can be enacted. Since Reconstruction after the Civil War, black women in particular have been portrayed as matriarchal and emasculating. They have thus been made responsible for the dysfunctionality of the black family even as state-enforced racist initiatives such as forced sterilization, segregation in housing, employment, and education, and the massive imprisonment of black men, to cite only a few, were and are still active in the US. Yet for Ferguson it is through a reclaiming of black sexuality and in particular non-normativity that subjects can resist and produce what he calls “ruptural possibilities” (17).

Race and queer historian Matt Richardson reaches a similar conclusion in The Queer Limit of Black Memory (2010), in which he makes a compelling case for the importance of retrieving black queer historical archives lost within the interstices of a whitewashed LGBTQIA+ history. Recalling a visit to the Museum of African Diaspora, Richardson observes how the various objects of the exhibition construct a collective memory altogether devoid of queer subjects, queer art, and queer presence. One of the main purposes of the
NALO HOPKINSON’S QUEER AFROFUTURISM

history recreated by the museum, according to Richardson, is to offer a counter-narrative to “the accusations of Black familial pathology and gender aberrance in the biologically based nuclear family” (4). Because of the centuries-long creation by white imperialism of the black body as sexually deviant, rewriting queerness into black culture and history would thus “threaten mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility” (4). As recent media attention to the systemic and nationally sanctioned racial violence in the US has shown, however, attempts to reach full humanity, citizenship, and even basic human rights do not depend on “racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility,” since living-as-black is punished regardless of gender, sexuality, class, and any other form of normativity. Consequently, Richardson proposes to use queerness and queer archives as a means to create a productive counter-narrative to the radical otherness of the black body. The reinscription of sexuality, and even queerness, into black cultural history is thus a means to reclaim humanity.

Ferguson’s notion of ruptural possibilities and Richardson’s insistence on the importance of black queer archives are both afrofuturist projects precisely because they challenge historical narratives that produce the violent and dehumanizing erasure and negation of black and/or queer subjects. If according to Kilgore, Afrofuturism disrupts linear historicity by using the past as a way to reimagine the future, then queer afrofuturist texts make a similar and concomitant promise to subvert a heteronormative white history. In my analysis below of three of Hopkinson’s texts, I expand upon the potentials of an Afrofuturism that always understands race as sexual—a queer Afrofuturism. Queer Afrofuturism distinguishes itself in significant ways because it subverts the social construct of race by challenging the relationship between power and the body, between visual markers of otherness and identity, and by reclaiming the positions of black and/or queer subjects in historical narratives where they have been violently erased.

(In)visibility Powers: The Chaos. Hopkinson’s The Chaos, a young-adult fantasy novel set in Toronto, follows the adventures of Sojourner “Scotch,” a sixteen-year-old light-skinned black girl with a white Jamaican father and a black American mother. In the middle of teenage friendships, heartache, and sexual awareness, the Chaos happens: a worldwide catastrophe that turns the most absurd dark fantasies into realities. A house acquires prehistorical bird-legs; men are turned into purple hippopotamuses with tiny party hats or a mountain of jelly beans; a gigantic volcano appears in the middle of Lake Toronto; and strange ghosts follow people around and whisper into their ears. The first-person narrative, told from Scotch’s perspective, revolves around her own chaotic event: tar-like black patches, thick as rubber and temporarily making her invincible, have started to grow on her skin. In the middle of the novel, Scotch becomes entirely covered in the tar-like substance and becomes a monstrous creature whom passersby pelt with rocks. At the resolution of the book, the tar patches finally disappear and Scotch happily recovers a brown
body with a darker skin-tone. The novel follows a traditional coming-of-age storyline but is distinctive in that the main protagonist eventually comes to terms with her body and her racial identity as a woman of color by being confronted with extreme racism and social exclusion.

Scotch’s chaotic adventure throughout the book is a very literal representation of racial ostracization and of the experiences of people of color with racism and colorism. She goes through various stages of social belonging as her physical appearance changes from white-passing to total dehumanization to, at the end of the novel, the return to a body marked as brown. In this ever-changing representation of racial identity, Hopkinson challenges and subverts the relationship between race and the body in complex ways. In the novel, the performance of race as it is enacted by racial markers on the body, such as skin tone, hair style, and kinship, is not static but rather evolves depending on context and social factors. In other words, the protagonist’s relation to her environment changes because her identity is alternatively invisible (white passing) and ultra-visible (with the significant image of the tar-baby). The visibility or invisibility of Scotch’s identity in the book inextricably makes race akin to something like sexual identity, since heteronormativity demands queerness to be made explicitly visible via gender performance, relationships, and other social signs. Therefore, in *The Chaos*, the concepts of race and sexuality as social constructs become inextricably linked signifiers.

At the beginning of the novel, Scotch passes as white or racially ambiguous because of her light skin. The tar-patches phenomenon occurs before the Chaos but only in small spots that she covers up with clothing. Concerned with her appearance, she uses whitening creams and other solutions, though to no avail. Her efforts represent some of the conflicts she experiences in relation to race, especially in terms of colorism. Early on, she faces racist and colorist attitudes: right before the Chaos emerges, a white man talking her up at a bar praises her for not looking “half black” because she, in contrast to her darker-skinned brother, “could be almost anything at all ... Jewish, or Arabic, or Persian” (loc 815). Although the man’s exoticization of her rightfully shocks and offends her, it is not until the tar patches expand on her body that she fully experiences the concept of otherness. In a climactic scene in the novel, a rolling calf named Spot completely covers the rest of Scotch’s already partially tarred body with the black substance. Subsequently, she transforms into a monstrous bloated creature: “[my mouth] was just a slit with teeth and a tongue behind it. My hair was all lumpy black strands. My head looked like a badly made Koosh ball. My hands were thick-fingered, slightly sticky mittens” (loc 2631). As such, Scotch unwittingly terrifies an old lady until bystanders, including a black teenage girl, start throwing rocks at her. At the end of the scene she is completely dehumanized as the old lady says, “It jumped out from under the car at me!” (loc 2649; emphasis added). In this episode, light-skinned Scotch experiences for the first time an inescapable, visible “skin” that renders her entirely other and fully monstrous.

While weird creatures and extraordinary humans constitute the city’s Chaos population (the black teenager, for example, has wings), Scotch is the only
character to experience such a full social exclusion. Horrified at her own appearance, she even tries to “[claw] the black rind off [her]” but this only results in her “gouging [her] own skin” (loc 2655). The experience also reminds her of her previous classmates bullying her because of her hair. Significantly, she compares her present “gummed-up” hair to the time that girls put chewing gum in it because, according to her mother, “they envied [her] natural ringlets” (loc 2665). Hopkinson’s very literal representation of racial ostracization in this scene exemplifies Afrofuturism’s quality as “an Afrocentric form of futurist expression authored by black creators who eschew SF’s often-metaphorical approaches to the reality of racial politics” (Kilgore 3). In other words, afrofuturist writers tackle head-on issues that other types of sf may only represent through imagery. In *The Chaos*, Hopkinson outlines a version of queer Afrofuturism in which she challenges the ways bodies are read. Whiteness and heterosexuality are invisible identities because of the context of white universalism and compulsory heterosexuality, which also includes heteronormative conditions for the performance of gender. As a queer Afrofuturist text, *The Chaos* subverts the conditions of this invisibility. In this sense Hopkinson turns blackness into an identity akin to queerness, that is to say, an identity likely to be interpreted differently depending on context and visual emphasis.

While queerness is essentially “invisible” since it requires the performance of visible actions such as nonnormative gender performance and identity and observable same-sex relationships, blackness is a visible marker of difference—through skin color and tone, hair, facial features, etc.—that can arguably only be made “invisible” through the performance of passing as nonblack. In other words, to be read as queer requires an active performance of some kind, or an explicit oral or visual statement; therefore an individual must choose to reveal herself as queer. On the contrary, racialized features are made constantly visible by the context of white universalism in the West, where the normal subject is white and nonwhite subjects are others. In the first case, a queer person must perpetually come out as queer to people for whom sexual identity is framed by compulsory heterosexuality. In the latter, racial markers of identity are inescapable because certain physical features are categorized within white hegemony as “other.” In Hopkinson’s work race and sexuality are entirely inextricable, and she uses magic to explore the meaning of going from “invisible” to “visible” identities. In so doing, she subverts the meaning of race as an easily identified, unchanging marker of identity at the same time as she explores issues of colorism and relations to the body.

*The Chaos* uses the explicit magic of the tar-like substance to make a powerful metaphor of the relationship between power and the body. Scotch’s experience with visible markers of difference throughout the novel is a conflation of race and sexuality, whereby the body becomes the visual signifier of a person’s identity as other. Hopkinson’s queer Afrofuturism in this novel highlights the intricate ways in which social constructions such as race and queerness transform the body and the body’s relationship to the social sphere.
The Black Queer Subject in History: *The Salt Roads*. *The Salt Roads* follows three women across time and space: Mer, a plantation slave on the island of Saint Domingue right before the Haitian revolution of 1791; Jeanne Duval, the famous Haitian-born mistress to Charles Baudelaire in 1848 Paris; and Thais, a prostitute from Alexandria who is revealed to be Saint Mary of Egypt, the “dusky” saint. All three women are visited and sometimes possessed by the fertility goddess Ezili (also referred to as Lasirèn), from whose perspective the novel is written. They strive to survive and achieve modicums of security and freedom beyond their oppressive situations (in the case of Jeanne and Thais, sexual servitude). Their particular (albeit unconscious) connection through Ezili indicates their linked plight through different times and spaces as they navigate through intersected levels of racist, sexist, and sexual oppressions. *The Salt Roads*’ non-linear time frame and Ezili’s power to go through time and space represent a queer Afrofuturist tale that situates black queer subjects across history, denying a white heteronormative narrative that places the emergence of modern sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe.

The strength of the novel relies on its unconventional treatment of time and space as well as on a fragmented narrative structure loosely connected by the omniscient narrator Ezili. The time frame of *The Salt* is radically nonlinear, as the narrative begins with Mer and Jeanne (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively) and introduces Thais (fourth century) only toward the end of the novel. The jumps among wildly different time frames force the reader to establish connections among significantly different places and contexts (Haiti before the slave revolution; modern Paris; ancient Egypt). This practice deconstructs a concept of history as linear and unilateral: the historical events are not disconnected by time and place but are part of a larger experience of systemic oppression. In other terms, Hopkinson creates a horizontal version of history—Mer’s and the other slaves’ struggles with their white masters are not simply a manifestation of a discreet, localized conflict between Europeans and slaves in Haiti, but part of larger context that will have reverberations through time and place, including with Jeanne Duval’s relationship to the modernist poet Charles Baudelaire. In an original and provocative essay, Leif Sorensen argues that Hopkinson’s style is best understood through dubwise, a subset of reggae music whose “disruptive reverberations and loops disrupt the flow of the original” (267). A dub single contains both the original track and the dub remix, neither of which is autonomous. The experience of listening to both creates what Sorensen argues is a Jamesonian “diascical shock.” Analyzing both *The Salt Roads* and *Midnight Robber*, he writes that “[Hopkinson] uses dub as a theoretical and aesthetic model for conceptualizing the dialectical experience of lived modernities in the Caribbean by remixing the history of social and aesthetic modernity to create narratives that point toward alternative futures” (267). Sorensen’s analysis highlights Hopkinson’s deconstruction of imperialist, racist, and gendered narratives about these different characters and contexts, all of which have implications in terms of the future subjectivities of the characters.
Through her narrator, Hopkinson rewrites and subverts the classic science-fiction time-travel narrative. Indeed, Ezili is only slightly different than, say, Quantum Leap’s Dr. Sam Becket, a physicist who goes back in time (and through space) and takes the place of various people in order to change significant historical mistakes. The major difference between these two characters is the rationale given for their power: in Ezili’s case, magic; in Beckett’s, “science.” But traditional sf time-travel narratives often rely on some idea of modifying the past to change the future in a positive way (the plot twist always being that these changes have dramatic consequences). Dr. Beckett’s intervention in every episode transforms the life of the person whose place he takes and prevents at the same time a tragic occurrence. This trope only makes sense in the context of progressivism, or the idea that as time goes on society progresses toward a better future. In other words, Beckett has the power to improve people’s lives because he comes from a present/future that is better, a time where his more profound knowledge of the historical context allows him to make the right decisions. In Hopkinson’s version of the trope, however, travels through time and space do not transform Mer’s, Jeanne’s, or Thais’s lives precisely because time does not necessarily move toward improvement. Jeanne’s situation is no “better” than Mer’s or Thais’s even though she lives in Paris, the epitome of modernity, in a relationship with a white man who, as Sorensen argues, represents the figure of modernism (273). This is not to say, of course, that Hopkinson presents a view of history as uniformly miserable for oppressed people. Rather, Hopkinson subverts the very linearity of time that sustains a progressivist myth, an ideology that also supports the presumed modernity or primitivism of places. As Sorensen writes, “in The Salt Roads the reader jumps between the imperial metropole of Paris and the colonial periphery of Haiti. In both texts, the margins of modernity cannot be dismissed as spaces of insufficient development and the center is not a utopian space in which oppression can be overcome” (270). In other words, Hopkinson’s Paris does not stand as the place of modernity, with its associated orderliness, progress, and liberalism, just as Haiti does not stand as the distant “dark” past of slavery.

In this critique of linear time and the myth of progressivism, the figure of the black queer character takes on its full importance. As Marlon B. Ross argues, the paradigm of the closet makes it easy to situate the white European queer as the “first” modern starting point of the homosexual as “species,” thereby classifying other queer cultures as primitive. Hopkinson’s reinscription of the black queer body throughout time and space, therefore, functions as a counter-narrative to the whitewashing of queer theory, and simultaneously the heterosexualization of African-American history. In The Salt Roads, Hopkinson represents queerness as commonplace and even matter-of-fact. Mer, for example, participates in a long-term relationship with Tipi, a woman also happily married to Patrice, an escaped slave. The entire island is aware of the women’s relationship and understands Mer and Tipi as “z’anmies” or what modern media would probably call “gal pals.” Mer and Tipi’s romance is a subplot to the narrative that only becomes important when Tipi decides to stay
with Mer in spite of Patrice’s proposal to escape to the bush. The same can be said of Jeanne: while the main narrative focuses on her stormy patronage relationship to Charles Baudelaire, Lisette is said to be her “true love.” As Kate Houlden recently put it, Hopkinson “seamlessly, and undramatically, makes reference to a wide spectrum of sexual desires … [that represent] a sensuous portrayal of the mutability of black female sexuality” (465). Hopkinson uses various depictions of queerness—same-sex scenes, non-traditional relationships, and even “kinky” sex—with the explicit aim to represent realistically the various normal sexualities and desires of different characters of color. As she explains in a 2005 interview, these frank depictions of sex and sexuality humanize a people who are consistently dehumanized:

I think we (Caribbean people) are so used to huge taboos against many types of sexual expression…. For me, the fact that I was finding it so difficult to depict two black Caribbean men publicly wining each other down (the only translation that comes to mind is “dirty dancing”) meant that I had to portray it as an act of freeing up my own mind, as an acknowledgement that it happens in the real world…. For me, it’s part of my avowal that black people and Caribbean people are human, in the face of a world that continually tries to convince us that we’re not. (Johnston 208)

To represent her characters, one of whom is an actual historical figure, as queer is thus part of an effort to reclaim queer history within pan-African contexts.

Furthermore, Hopkinson uses Jeanne as a particularly mischievous rhetorical device that deliberately works against the historical romanticization of Baudelaire. In The Salt Roads, which follows the actual biography of Baudelaire, the poet is portrayed as a pathetic and incompetent lover whose self-obsession is set against Jeanne’s very real concerns for her social and economic status. In Baudelaire’s actual poems about Duval, he consistently exoticizes her by comparing her to savage elements and nature as well as to various evil characters such as the devil. Hopkinson’s version of Baudelaire is patronizing, contemptuous, racist, and entirely blind to Jeanne’s needs and desires. While he does provide for her, he is incapable of understanding the plight of having to work for a cabaret and the consequent urgent need to find a patron, or her need for money to buy medicine for her ailing mother as opposed to the jewelry he bestows upon her. In a particularly enjoyable scene, Jeanne teaches Charles the arts of loving a woman by sodomizing him with her fingers, to his great pleasure. Hopkinson imagines one of the most famous European poets enjoying kinky sex with his black mistress as part of Hopkinson’s effort to desensitize sexuality and sex involving black queer women across history. Moreover, in decentering Baudelaire to a secondary character position (as well as portraying him as a selfish, incompetent fool), Hopkinson rewrites history into an Afrofuturist, Afrocentric narrative with a black queer prostitute in the foreground.

Shedding Skins: “A Habit of Waste.” “A Habit of Waste” is Hopkinson’s first published short story and one of her most famous. It opens as Cynthia, the
main character, discovers that someone has recuperated her former body. In this universe, people can switch bodies and discard them like clothing. Cynthia disgruntledly looks on as her old voluptuous, big-reared black body boards the bus she is riding in her new slim—although starting to age visibly—white body. In typical Hopkinson fashion, however, this radical event is not the main plot of the story. Rather, we follow Cynthia as she befriends an old Trinidadian man who visits the food bank where she works. She discovers Old Man Morris’s survival techniques—namely, sling-shooting wild rabbits for dinner—in a world in which food rations seem to be controlled by numbers of calories and people have forgotten how to grow food. At the end of the story, Old Man Morris sling-shoots a man attempting to rob and presumably sexually assault her. In the story, the decentralization of the body as a stable signifier of identity is a profoundly queer rhetorical move; the subject’s race, gender, and sexuality become entirely irrelevant precisely because the body is no longer an inescapable prison of flesh. Thus “A Habit of Waste” illustrates queer Afrofuturism’s potential to reveal the absurdities of the hold social constructions have on the body.

“A Habit of Waste” is a prime example of Hopkinson’s capacity to use sf tropes to explore intersectionality and its accompanying challenges. She artfully weaves important themes into the apparent simplicity of the story: body images tightly link with race and ethnicity as Cynthia goes through an important renegotiation of her identity. In this alternative reality, the body becomes all at once the most important vector of identity (as the body is both the signifier and the signified of standards of beauty, and of race and nationality) and at the same time the least significant (since it can be exchanged at will). The capacity to change bodies is significant for both race and queerness. In continuation of the Afrofuturist tradition of questioning visible racial markers (such as skin color) as the primary determinant of identity—as in George Schuyler’s satirical novel Black No More (1931)—Hopkinson imagines the consequences for a Trinidadian person with black parents to be “read” as white/Canadian. Old Man Morris “tones down” his characteristic Trinidadian accent when talking to Cynthia because he sees her as a white, and therefore Canadian, individual. Here the author conflates racial markers with ethnicity and nationality. Whereas in Schuyler’s novel the black characters “turning white” provokes a global social anxiety that eventually results in white people tanning under the sun to recreate a racial divide, in Hopkinson’s story Cynthia’s “white facing” is a means to distance herself from her heritage as a second-generation immigrant. At the beginning of the story, we learn that Cynthia switched her body without telling her parents (appearing at their doorstep as a white, blond woman), having only kept her voice so that they would recognize her. In fact, she is greatly embarrassed by their Trinidadian accents, customs, and humor: she wishes her father would stop making jokes about her large behind; she is upset about the connection between them and Old Man Morris; she would rather they “drop the Banana Boat accents. They’d come to Canada five years before I was even born, for Christ’s sake, and I was now twenty-eight” (85).
When Old Man Morris refers to himself as “an ol’ man from back home,” she wants to say “I’m not from ‘back home’” (87).

Furthermore, the exchange of body at the center of Cynthia’s identity evolution represents an inherently queer desire to transcend the limits of the socially constructed body. Because some of our identities, such as race and gender, are ineluctably inscribed on the physical body, they are virtually inescapable. Although identity markers are not necessarily immediately “readable” (such as in the case of The Chaos’s Scotch and her ambiguous racial identity and in the case of queer individuals who perform ambiguous gender identities), the physical body cannot be changed without extensive medical intervention. In “A Habit of Waste” however, switching bodies is a casual matter that seems to involve only will and money. Consequently, the body loses some of its significance as undeniable “evidence” of identity; its very liminality puts in jeopardy any attempt at reifying categories of identity. “A Habit of Waste” profoundly decenters the body as vector of identity by rendering it superficial to a person’s core being. This decentering is a queer Afrofuturist process because it radically subverts both race and sexuality since they depend on stable visual markers on the body. The body of the racialized other is the only physical, visual intimation of its otherness; it is essential that it remain stable and monolithic in order for its otherness to be maintained.

Similarly, sexuality as it is understood currently is dependent upon the gender identity of the object of desire. Therefore, sexuality necessitates stable sexed and gendered bodies. The current trans panic provoked by the emergence and popularization of trans-rights activists underlines social tensions and anxieties surrounding the relationship between the body and identity whereby a changing (or non-changing) body comes to signify the threat of rape and sexual perversion. Hopkinson’s queer Afrofuturism invents a technology that simultaneously challenges both race and sexuality as social constructions.

In spite of the radical decentering of the body in the world of the story, however, characters do not escape the history of racism and devaluation of the black body. The story implies that Cynthia switched bodies for aesthetic reasons, already suggesting the negative implications of the black body. When Old Man Morris learns from her that her parents are also Trinidadian, he assumes them to be white until she reveals her appropriation of this new white body. To her revelation, he exclaims: “Lord, the things you young people does do for fashion, eh?” (87). Clearly, Cynthia rejects features of black beauty, as she admires the fact that “[t]he boyish [new] body was still slim, thighs still thin, tiny-perfect apple breasts still perky” (84). The vocabulary she uses in this description contrasts sharply with her appraisal of her “original” body: “same full, tarty-looking lips; same fat thighs, rubbing together with every step; same outsized ass; same narrow torso that seems grafted onto a lower body a good three sizes bigger, as though God had glued leftover parts together” (83). The repetition of the word “still” in the description of her white body denotes hopefulness, quality, and a quasi-corporate evaluation of a product. In contradiction, the repetition of the word “same” implies that the black body does not evolve and cannot change in time. The stereotypical
features Cynthia focuses on in her description represent elements of the black female body that are considered by (white) society to be unattractive. These features cannot exist in either the category “race” or the category “sex” simply because they are particular to both; they represent the specific oppression exerted on black women’s bodies.

Such a dichotomy is ambiguous, however: the white body is not “glowing” like the stranger’s black skin; it shows age via crow’s feet around the eyes; it has a “flabby behind” (84). Similarly, when Cynthia gazes at her previous body, she switches from a particularly racialized hatred of the “back-to-Africa nostalgia shit,” of the “nappy-headed nonsense,” of the stranger’s skirt that makes “your ass into a billboard,” to a much more body-positive and accepting attitude. Indeed, she discovers that the stranger manages to make Cynthia’s old body “sexy” and to successfully beautify the skin by wearing a white shirt and by unapologetically wearing a brightly-colored mini-skirt (84). In this evolution in Cynthia’s feelings about racialized beauty—whether it be white standards of beauty that do not turn out to be so beautiful or black features that turn out to be beautiful—Hopkinson intertwines body issues with race. The sf trope of the separation of mind and body is used here not in the context of a “post-racial” future in which the body’s racial features would matter little, but is, on the contrary, inextricably linked to institutionalized racism and sexism. Yet the real genius of the story lies in the author’s tying together these issues with ethnicity and nationality.

Hopkinson uses food to highlight Cynthia’s reluctant approach to her identity as a second-generation immigrant from the Caribbean with a prejudice against her former black body. Food represents an essential cultural element, particularly for immigrant communities, where geographically specific markets open to maintain particular food cultures. Although it is only implied in the text, it seems that the government radically controls citizens’ food intake, as Cynthia must calculate the calories given to beneficiaries of the food bank. Nevertheless, Old Man Morris reveals that food is available everywhere, as he picks kale from the front yard of a bank (where they are considered ornamental) and hunts wild rabbit (which Cynthia thinks, wrongly, must carry diseases). This passage suggests that people have forgotten what “natural” food is or how to grow it. More importantly, the feast prepared by Old Man Morris for her reminds her of the quality and taste of real cooked food, making her forget “all about calories and daily allowable grams of fat” (88). By the end of the story, she even insists on eating everything her parents have prepared for Thanksgiving and she drinks the Trinidadian hot cocoa that she previously rejected.

Throughout the story, Hopkinson thus uses food as a means to control or to lose control over the body. Cynthia feels as if she must maintain the slimness of her white body by refusing to eat certain types of food. In other words, she must maintain herself as “still slim” and “still thin,” the features that were given her with the purchase of this white body. The Trinidadian feast prepared by Old Man Morris, however, and the Trinidadian hot cocoa prepared by her parents change her and allow her to rediscover the pleasure
of eating—at the risk of “losing” the qualities of the white body. By the end, Cynthia even acknowledges her acceptance of the possibility of becoming fat (92). In juxtaposing body issues with race, Hopkinson powerfully highlights the strongly racialized nature of body images and standards of beauty. Additionally, she uses food as a cultural vector that reconciles the character with both “her” body and her racial identity through ethnicity and nationality.

“A Habit of Waste” foreshadows Hopkinson’s future publications in its criticism of racialized and gendered standards of beauty, in its queering of the body, and in its complex relations to cultural identities. It is also a staple of queer Afrofuturism in its subversion of the sf trope of the disembodied mind in that it decenters the body as stable signifier of identity.

Conclusion. I have introduced the theoretical concept of queer Afrofuturism in an effort to draw attention to Afrofuturist texts, particularly those written by women and/or queer writers, that understand race as sexual and sexuality as racially defined. I have simultaneously argued that some of the projects at the heart of black queer theory are profoundly afrofuturist, and at the same time inserted these ideas into current definitions of Afrofuturism. I contend that Afrofuturism and black queer theory are concomitant projects that subvert the paradigm of normalcy established by white hegemony and heteropatriarchy. Both projects also contest the idea of linear time that supports the binary of primitivism/ modernity. While Afrofuturism challenges the sf tropes, characters, conventions, and settings that signify progress and modernism as white, queer afrofuturist texts similarly subvert the erasure of black queer bodies from the past as well as from the future.

I have used Nalo Hopkinson’s work as a prime example of queer Afrofuturism for several reasons. First, in her work race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and culture are always intertwined inextricably; her characters represent complex intersectional identities and their relationships to the world are always defined by intricate yet related forms of oppression. Second, Hopkinson’s mix of genres is in itself queer Afrofuturism in that it rejects conventional tropes that usually eschew these complex forms of identities by, at best, a process of tokenization (in science fiction in particular, a character is either black or queer, but rarely both). Finally, Hopkinson’s focus on the body and its limitations in her fiction also means that she uses speculation as a tool to subvert the body’s centrality to identity, which I read as a fundamental tenet of queer Afrofuturism.

This discussion of Hopkinson’s oeuvre is aimed at opening up the discussion of queer Afrofuturism, a theoretical tool that will be useful not only for afrofuturist texts, but also for queer, feminist, and/or antiracist works of speculation. In parallel to the renewed Hugo Awards scandal of the Puppies’s coup against diverse speculative texts, the writing of an increasing number of queer folk, women, and/or people of color has been celebrated in multiple speculative awards and at large in Internet communities and fan conventions. This progress also influences the much larger and more conservative domain of Hollywood movies, for example with the casting of Samira Wiley as Moira
in Hulu’s upcoming series adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Wiley is a queer African-American actress who plays the role of the protagonist’s close friend, a white queer character in the novel. As the market for speculative fiction evolves, more intersectional approaches to such texts are greatly needed. Queer Afrofuturism is a step in that direction.

NOTES

1. Chuck Tingle is the pseudonym of an anonymous parody writer of gay sf erotica. In 2014 and 2015 the Hugo Award nominations, voted on by fans for best sf of the year, were indeed hijacked by the Sad Puppies and later by the more radical Rabid Puppies, a group led by Theodore Beale (Vox Day). The latter bought a high number of WorldCon memberships in order to put relatively unknown white male authors on the slates, giving voters the choice to either vote for them or for no one at all. For a more detailed account of the controversy, see Grigsby’s “Freeping the Hugo Awards.”

2. All of these writers have recently received awards including Hugos and Nebulas, and/or have been featured on “best of” lists.


4. For a more extensive discussion of the problem of genre in speculation, see Rieder’s brilliant essay “On Defining SF, or Not.”


7. For a discussion on how technology and especially Internet spaces are codified as white, see Nakamura’s *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (2002). In her introduction to *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*, Nelson also argues that blackness is constructed “as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (1).

8. To a certain extent black feminism has always been a part of Afrofuturism, since scholars such as Thomas and Nelson have been at the forefront of early Afrofuturist scholarship; see Thomas’s *Dark Matter* (2000) and Nelson’s “Introduction” (2002), for example. Similarly, black feminist writers such as Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany are the most commonly cited figures of Afrofuturism.

9. For example, Pearson and Knabe’s recent queer analysis of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, “Gambling Against History” (2013), illustrates the fruitful possibilities of a queer analysis of even the apparently heteronormative context of Butler’s neo-slave narrative.

10. See in particular Ross’s pathbreaking essay “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm.”

11. The vast majority of violence (including murder, rape, beatings, and incarceration) committed against trans people is directed at black transwomen and transwomen of color.

13. Lightening/bleaching creams have an important historical significance in the context of American colonialism and imperialism. See Blay’s “Skin Bleaching and Global White Supremacy: By Way of Introduction” (2011).

14. The rolling calf or “duppy” is a malevolent spirit from Caribbean folklore. Hopkinson uses a rolling calf elsewhere in her work, notably in Midnight Robber (2000).

15. Right before the intervention of this character who was “black, about my age, wearing jeans and a T-shirt” (loc 2638 and 2645), Scotch has told the old lady: “I’m just a teenager, okay? I mean, a girl. A girl teenager” (loc 2638), meaningfully reclaiming her humanity by insisting on her youth and femininity in an attempt to move the attention away from her black monstrosity.

16. See, for example, Baudelaire’s poem “Sed Non Satiata” [Unsatisfied, 1857].

WORKS CITED


ABSTRACT
This essay argues for an intersectional approach to Afrofuturism, a genre defined by Mark Dery as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (“Black to the Future” 180). Joining together black queer theory and afrofuturist theory, I introduce the concept of queer Afrofuturism, a term designating Afrofuturist texts in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality so that it is impossible to talk about one without already signifying the other. In a second part of the essay, I use queer Afrofuturism as a theoretical framework and analyze Nalo Hopkinson’s novels The Chaos (2012), The Salt Roads (2003), and her short story “A Habit of Waste” (2001). I argue that Hopkinson’s work is a particularly striking example of queer Afrofuturism because she uses intersectional characters with complex identities and genre-bending tropes to challenge rigid notions about identity, the body, and relationships.