

Kali Tal

[I] had begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery. Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality, I thought. All of reality was absurd, contradictory, violent and hurting. It was funny, really. If I could just get the handle to the joke. And I had got the handle, by some miracle.

—Chester Himes, *My Life of Absurdity*

In 1977, when I was a sixteen-year-old high-school dropout, I had the good fortune to be admitted to a graduate course in science fiction writing taught by Theodore Sturgeon at Antioch College West, in Hollywood, California. For our third or fourth assignment, Ted gave us instructions to write a science fiction story that explained “why black people don’t write science fiction.” That seemed like a good question to me, and I gave it as much thought as a precocious white sixteen-year-old could. (I am not sure how long Ted had been asking his classes this question, but I do know that ours was not the first to hear it.) In my own story, I gave my readers a sociological explanation: black people were too busy surviving in the here and now to write science fiction. All my classmates adopted sociological or social psychological explanations in their stories as well. These variations on a theme apparently made good sense to Ted, and I do not recall any other explanations being offered.

Over the last quarter of a century I’ve grown to understand that Ted asked the wrong question, and we students (all of us white) came up with the wrong answers. A liberal humanist, a strong supporter of black civil rights and of human rights, a visionary and a philosopher, Ted, like virtually everyone else in the science fiction world in the 1970s, was unable to see what was right before his eyes. I know for a fact that he read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for we discussed it during a late-night jaunt to Ship’s coffeehouse. It never occurred to either of us to think of Ellison’s novel as an example of black science fiction. I am sure, because he was a voracious and eclectic reader, that Ted was familiar with, if he had not himself read, the works of John A. Williams and Sam Greenlee. And yet he never mentioned them as writers within the genre of science fiction or even “speculative fiction,” as some were beginning to call it. The failure to see what is, literally, right before our eyes has everything to do with how

we see what we see. In order to recognize and evaluate African American works of science fiction, readers and critics need first to be familiar with the traditions of African American literature and culture. As Gregory Rutledge (2000) cautions us, we cannot effectively “evaluate the creative efforts of black futurist fiction authors without a cultural predicate grounded in the black experience” (128).

Science fiction has always been the literature to which I turn for insight, intelligent entertainment, and thought-provoking argument. It’s an inherited passion, as my mother was (and still is) addicted to the genre. While I was growing up she stored the “overflow” books from her collection in my bedroom. When, in community college, I began to study African American literature, I kept those course texts on other shelves. Before I reached graduate school, however, the lines had begun to blur, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, and John Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am* all migrated from the African American literature shelf to the science fiction shelf, while Samuel R. Delany’s books and Octavia Butler’s books migrated to the African American literature shelf when I discovered, in the early 1980s, that each author is African American. To this day these books, and others like them, lead a nomadic existence, filed under whichever category seems most appropriate at any given moment.

White critics and audiences have often ignored and miscategorized books by African American writers, treating them, because of the race of their authors, as a breed apart. Earl A. Cash, in his study of John A. Williams (1975), describes the malign neglect of African American writers, the majority of whom have worked within a naturalist tradition since the turn of the last century. He notes, “As in social matters so it is in the literary: race became an inevitable determinant. What by a white writer was naturalism became by a black self-serving, paranoid exaggerations” (1). The books that I discuss in this essay have all been dismissed for exactly that reason.

This essay briefly outlines one subgenre of African American science fiction: the black militant near-future novel.¹ In each text to which I refer, African Americans join in violent revolution against the system of white supremacy. All embrace a philosophy that affirms that “only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed” and share “the view that moral concepts can be analyzed in terms of concepts applicable to natural phenomena.”² It is not my goal here to substantively critique each work: each text and each author has been critiqued in isolation already (in some cases at length). Rather, my intent here is to define a genre and suggest that we might, as

scholars and activists, benefit from excavating the connections between these texts and begin to explore the implications of a distinguishable, though submerged, pattern of kill-the-white-folks futurist fiction in the African American literary tradition.

The four novels chiefly considered in this essay were, in their time, near-future histories in the naturalist vein: Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), George Schuyler's *Black Empire* (serialized in sixty-two installments from 1936 to 1938), John A. Williams's *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* (1969), and Chester Himes's *Plan B* (begun in 1968 but still unfinished on his death in 1983). Griggs's novel partakes of the melodrama that went hand in hand with naturalist writing at the turn of the twentieth century, as exemplified by such tearjerkers as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), and Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905). Schuyler's serial novels are at home on a shelf with the naturalist melodrama writers of the day, including Horatio Alger and pioneering science fiction pulp writer Edgar Rice Burroughs. Himes's *Plan B* employs the gritty "street" credibility of noir and can, along with his other detective novels, easily be compared with the work of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* can be read comfortably alongside Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* as an urban novel of cause and effect, crime and consequence.

What separates these African American authors from their white peers, in addition to the double standard to which Earl Cash refers, are their roots in African American literary and folk traditions and their commitment to detailing the circumstances of their oppression: "the poverty, sickness, discrimination and sometimes joys" of being black in America (Cash 1975, 3). As Gilbert Muller says, "black artistic truth reveals essentially a failure in the underlying structures of white Western civilization and a proposal to set right those destructive social and political forces in nature" (31). In different degrees, these four texts reflect a profound pessimism about the possibility of achieving justice and equality "within the system." They present the argument that African Americans must revolt or succumb to slow death at the hands of their oppressors. Each features a secret society of dedicated revolutionaries, a charismatic leader or genius, a face-off between those blacks who advocate violence and those who cannot bring themselves to do so. None represent the best works of their authors, though they are all good books by excellent writers. It may be that the subject matter is too painful, the anger too hot, the conclusions too dire to stimulate and sustain the kind of creative energy that great writing requires. On the other hand, these texts and others that comprise the genre of black militant science fiction are far too important to over-

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look, as they delineate the extent of the rage and violent potential in a long-oppressed population, righteous and desperate, if neither united nor organized, in its will to freedom and equality.

Use What You Have to Get What You Need

Science fiction and naturalism mesh comfortably, as Jack London early demonstrated in his 1915 story "The Star Rover" (Furer 2000, 108). Contemporary near-future natural disaster novels like the now-classic *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977) and the more recent *The Rift* (1999) continue to reach the bestseller lists. Black militant near-future tales are closely aligned to a definition of science fiction attributed to Gregory Benford: "SF is a controlled way to think and dream about the future. An integration of the mood and attitude of science (the objective universe) with the fears and hopes that spring from the unconscious. Anything that turns you and your social context, the social you, inside out. Nightmares and visions, always outlined by the barely possible" (Gökçe 2001). As James E. Gunn underlines, science fiction "deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. . . . it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger."³

The visions in these books are fed by technology but not led by it. African American science fiction shares a cultural and social heritage with African American literature and, by extension, the traditions of African American arts. In this tradition the ingenuity of human beings is privileged over the products that they create. This emphasis on "soul," as African American historian Lerone Bennett describes it, is "very definitely nonmachine, but it is not antimachine; it simply recognizes that machines are generative power and not soul, instruments and not ends."⁴ As social science fiction, their chief concern is with working out the organization and structure of a future society, and they do it the way African Americans have often done it—without access to cutting-edge, high-tech machinery. Rather, they meet the challenge of envisioning a new future most often by "making do with what they have." As Nelson, Tu, and Hines (2001) have noted, people of color are experts at "'refunctioning' old/obsolete technologies or inventing new uses for common ones," fashioning "technologies to fit their needs and priorities. In the process, they have become innovators, creating new aesthetic forms . . . new avenues for political action, and new ways to articulate their identities (8). All four texts make use of old technologies in new and unexpected ways. Their inventiveness is in their ready subversion of the familiar world of ordinary

objects. In Himes's *Plan B*, for example, rifles are anonymously conveyed to African Americans by floral delivery messengers, who carry long gift-wrapped boxes tied with red ribbons—the sort in which one would expect to find roses.⁵ The entire sophisticated social mechanism for door-to-door delivery in 1960s Harlem is reemployed in a new and revolutionary cause. Only one novel, Schuyler's *Black Empire*, also relies on high-tech laboratories and facilities to bring about revolution. Even in that case, however, the money and influence needed to build and maintain an expensive technological base is initially earned in an illegal fashion or stolen from the wealthy white women mesmerized by the ingenious Dr. Belsidus.

Like most science fiction of the day, these texts are written by men and feature male protagonists. Women, when they are included, are secondary (though in the case of Schuyler's *Black Empire*, certainly quite strong) characters. The masculinist tendencies of the civil rights movement and the hyper-masculinist attitudes and self-presentation of the black power movement reinforce the already extremely sexist biases of the genre. These are not the books to read if one is searching for black women's perspectives on revolution and struggle. In fact, I have been able to locate no piece of writing by a black woman that could reasonably be described as belonging to this genre.⁶ It is entirely a masculine production. My treatment of gender in this essay, therefore, will be limited to a discussion of the roles that female characters play in each novel and their implications for thinking about black militancy.

Neither the male nor female literary tradition of the slave narrative provides a positive model for revolt: “Even [slaves'] rational violent resistance nearly always ends in either terrible punishment or death, with the slaveholder sneering and triumphant” (Bryant 1997, 26). It was stealth, cunning, rescue, or luck that freed runaway slaves in the narratives published in the antebellum period. Revolt, however, was a part of the African American oral tradition from the beginning, and word spread quickly on plantations and farms when a slave armed him or herself against a master. Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner quickly became folk heroes, their names whispered in the slave quarters wherever the word could be spread. So, it is no surprise that black militancy and revolt, however viciously punished, was a feature of black novels from the first moment of Emancipation. Jerry Bryant traces their path in the texts of the three earliest novels written by male African Americans: William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859–62), and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). Each of these books, in greater or lesser detail, portrays sympathetically the armed insurrection of slaves. *Blake*, with its plan “for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slav-

ery”⁷ was widely read and discussed in the African American literary community. It was likely the literary progenitor of the four novels under discussion and it set a precedent that has rarely been violated. The authors of black militant novels of armed resistance to and overthrow of white supremacy almost never attempt to describe postrevolutionary society and often abandon their protagonists before, in the middle of, or immediately after the battle. As in *Blake*, they often conclude on the very eve of insurrection.

Imperium in Imperio

In 1899 Sutton Griggs published *Imperium in Imperio*, a novel set approximately in the present day or near future. That was four years after Booker T. Washington’s address at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition made the call for economic interdependence of the races combined with social segregation. It was six years before W. E. B. DuBois founded the Niagara Movement as a counter to Washington’s accommodationist stance, and eleven years before the Springfield, Illinois, race riot resulted in the birth of the NAACP. When *Imperium* was written and published, violence against African Americans was at its height and black public awareness of, and opposition to, violent methods of oppression, particularly lynching, was at a sustained pitch (Bryant 1997, 72). Griggs was a young Baptist minister deeply involved in civil rights work and utterly opposed to Washington’s admonition. The violence and segregation of the post-Reconstruction period doubtless formed the basis for his radicalization and perhaps influenced his decision to leave Texas for a seminary in Virginia, where he became a pastor. Though *Imperium* was his first and best-known novel, Griggs wrote five more and an indeterminate number of essays on philosophy and politics. Practicing as well as preaching economic self-sufficiency, he self-published all of his literary and nonfiction writing and peddled it door-to-door.⁸

By his middle years, though Griggs still supported integration, he appears to have discovered that whites were most likely to donate money to the churches of men who publicly promoted causes that did not threaten the status quo. However, his reliance on funding from whites was his downfall, and he abandoned his bankrupt church in Virginia in 1929 when the stock market crashed. He returned, apparently reluctantly, to Texas and died that same year. The trajectory from radical to conservative marks the careers of both Griggs and George S. Schuyler. Unlike Schuyler, however, Griggs was always what Wilson Jeremiah Moses (1988) calls a “genteel black nationalist,” firmly middle class and,

despite his early militancy, rooted in European and American nationalist and separatist traditions that led to his later embrace of bourgeois assimilationist values. These early black militant novels are the products of youthful ire and fire, contrasting sharply with the later novels of John A. Williams and Chester Himes, which are the fruit of maturity and a long life of radical politics, anger, and frustration.

The phrase “Imperium in Imperio” means “a government independent of the general authorized government,” a shadow government waiting in the wings for an opportunity to displace the existing government.⁹ This is, indeed, the central plot of Griggs’s novel, though it is not revealed until the final third of the novel, when the wealthy and successful black protagonist, Belton Piedmont, inducts his old school friend and recent fugitive from the law, the mulatto Bernard Belgrave, into the secret government Belton administers. After putting Bernard through a loyalty test in which Bernard believes he faces death, Belton explains that Bernard is now part of “[a]nother government, complete in every detail, exercising the sovereign right of life and death over its subjects . . . organized and maintained within the United States for many years. This government has a population of 7,250,000” (Griggs 1999, 190). The organization sustaining the shadow government, like Schuyler’s Internationale, was founded and initially funded by a black scientist through “the publication of a book of science which outranked any other book of the day that treated of the same subject. . . . This wealthy negro secretly gathered other free negroes together and organized a society that had a two-fold object. The first object was to endeavor to secure for the free negroes all the rights and privileges of men, according to the teachings of Thomas Jefferson. Its other object was to secure the freedom of the enslaved negroes the world over” (191).

The book of science, Belton is careful to explain, “is now obsolete, science having made such great strides since his day.” The reader is intended to grasp the fact that it is not science or technology that will set the negro free but a reliance upon the revolutionary ideals that brought the slave masters freedom from Britain. Science and technology are merely tools, as Lerone Bennett said: instruments, not ends. The chief tool used to spread news of the organization among reliable blacks was education, and that effort increased manifold after Emancipation. Students “were instructed to pay especial attention of the United States during the revolutionary period” (193), and their new knowledge increased their outrage at the loss of rights suffered by southern blacks at the end of Reconstruction. “This secret organization of which we have been speaking decided that some means must be found to do what the government could not do, because of a defect in the Constitution. They decided to organize

a General Government that would protect the Negro in his rights” (194). The result is an alliance between all secret orders of African Americans, and all members of all secret orders were granted membership in the Imperium in Imperio after pledging their lives to the cause. Investments in southern land at the end of the Civil War had increased the fortune left by the scientist until it was worth half a billion dollars, placing the organization in a position secure enough to be ready and able to go to war against the U.S. government. And Bernard, Belton announces, is to be the new president.

Two subplots sustain the novel until it reveals the plot of revolution. The first is the friendship between Belton and Bernard, an alliance between a wealthy, light-skinned mulatto and a lower-class, dark-skinned African American. Though their white schoolteacher attempts to divide them by favoring the light-skinned Bernard, the two boys form a deep bond of companionship through an honest competition for excellence in all their endeavors. Their brilliance is evident from an early age, and by the time they graduate high school both are well known for their skills as historians and rhetoricians. At this time the two men part: wealthy Bernard goes to Harvard University and Belton, with the help of a wealthy white liberal patron, goes on to “Stowe,” a small college in Nashville, Tennessee. At Stowe, Belton forms his first secret society, with the password of “Equality or Death” (59), and has his first taste of defying white authority. Bernard, after graduation, meets his influential white father, who tells him that he will come into \$10 million and instructs him to attain power and influence, in which effort he will quietly be assisted by his father’s social connections. Bernard becomes an attorney, runs for Congress, and triumphs over a corrupt electoral process, securing himself fame and continuing fortune.

Belton, as we might expect, has a rougher time of it. His quiet life as a schoolteacher in a colored school in Richmond, Virginia, is destroyed when he starts up a newspaper and is fired from his teaching position for writing inflammatory articles. He secures and loses a series of menial jobs. Belton’s luck finally turns when he is invited back to Stowe College to take charge of the institution. Again his outspoken nature gets him into trouble, and he becomes the victim of a lynching in which he is actually hanged and shot in the head, but not killed. Unconscious, he revives on a dissection table, escapes, and seeks justice from the governor, who puts him in jail; he is saved only by Bernard’s influence and brilliant defense, after which he takes charge of Thomas Jefferson College in Waco, Texas, and devotes himself to the Imperium full-time. As he reveals, Belton has been a member of the secret organization since college.

Throughout the text, the differences in the opportunities and the

security offered to dark- and light-skinned blacks are highlighted. The fact that neither Bernard nor Belton will succumb to the forces that seek to divide them underlines their noble natures. And yet, when a confused Bernard asks Belton why he has, for so long, been excluded from the Imperium, Belton answers:

The relation of your mother to the Anglo-Saxon race has not been clearly understood, and you and she have been under surveillance for many years It was not until recently deemed advisable to let you in, your loyalty to the race never having fully been tested Various young men have been put forward for [the honor of the office of President] and vigorous campaigns have been waged in their behalf. But these all failed of the necessary unanimous vote. At last, one young man arose, who was brilliant and sound, genial and true, great and good. On every tongue was his name and in every heart his image. Unsolicited by him, unknown to him, the nation by its unanimous voice has chosen him the President of our beloved Government. . . . You, sir, are President of the Imperium in Imperio. (197–98)

In the same speech Belton informs Bernard that his light skin makes him a target of suspicion, and that all of black America agrees that Bernard is the pinnacle of the race. In the end, it is the mulatto Bernard who becomes the driving force behind a violent revolution—Bernard, who has not suffered overmuch from prejudice or discrimination. And it is Belton who sacrifices his life for the cause of nonviolence—Belton, who has been lynched and beaten and who has struggled all his life to be accepted as a man.

The tale of the Imperium and of both men is narrated by a third party, Berl Trout, who votes for the execution of Belton and fires the shot that kills him. Trout, horrified by his deed, decides to reveal the existence of the Imperium “so that it might be broken up or watched” (264). In the terms of the book, and in Belton’s own words, this is the action of a traitorous coward. Trout’s decision to commit an act condemned by both Belton and Bernard certainly brings his good character into question, and thus undermines his portrait of Bernard as a mad destroyer.

Though the contest in the book is between men of opposing opinion, it is important to examine the role that women play in this text. The mothers of both boys exert a strong influence upon them, shape their morals, and instill good values. Both mothers suffer: Hannah Piedmont struggles to feed her five children; the wealthy Fairfax Belgrave suffers a broken heart due to an enforced separation from her white husband.

Both men fall deeply in love, and their relationships to the women they love affect and are affected by their political commitments. Bernard courts the middle-class, dark-skinned, African-featured Viola Martin, who

cares for him but will not marry him. When Bernard presses too hard, Viola commits suicide, leaving behind a note explaining that though she loves him, she cannot marry a mulatto because she once read in a book that “that the intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race” (178).

The stories of Bernard’s and Belton’s love relationships are the least credible in the text. The behavior of the female characters is neither sympathetic nor comprehensible. That Viola, who fears the extinction of her people, should choose to kill herself for love rather than to live in sacrifice in a marriage with a dark-skinned man, producing children for her race, is implausible. But it is not with Viola that Griggs is concerned. Her suicide serves to create the moment of despair in which Bernard is summoned by Belton and will be most receptive to the revelation of the Imperium in Imperio. He is charged by Viola to commit himself to a struggle against miscegenation and, if that fails, to lead their people to another land where they can live free from the threat of interbreeding. Thus, at the end, when Bernard declares war and passes up the option of emigration, he violates Viola’s trust. He also violates his mother’s trust by urging violence against whites (and thus, theoretically, endangering the life of her husband and his father).

Belton weds the middle-class, light-skinned, European-featured Antoinette Nermal but then abandons her in horror when she has a fair-skinned child. They are not reconciled until immediately before his execution, when he visits his wife’s home and finds that the child has darkened with age and is his spitting image, though “a shade darker.” He goes to his death “proud of his noble wife, proud of his promising son” (259). Belton’s abandonment of Antoinette is motivated by his anger and embarrassment and his belief that Antoinette has succumbed to the temptations that an interracial relationship might offer, a temptation made more attractive because of Belton’s inability to properly support her.

Belton himself knows something of the temptations to which he fears Antoinette has succumbed, since during the low period in which he moved from job to job he was forced to disguise himself as a black woman and take work as a nurse. He was pressured to grant sexual favors to young white men of the families for whom he worked, and when he resisted too long and too loudly, he was eventually kidnapped (probably with the intent of rape) and exposed as male. This period of cross-dressing serves the purpose of giving Belton a “universal” understanding of the plight of African Americans, transcending the barriers of gender. The description of his masquerade is the antithesis of camp, and Belton’s experience as a woman is never made to seem ridiculous.

It is Belton's mistaken conclusion that Antoinette has "fallen" to the blandishments of a white man that moves him to treat her, in his heart, as if she had died. In Grigg's terms, Belton's abandonment of Antoinette relieves Belton of all familial responsibilities and allows him to devote himself entirely to the work of building the Imperium, unhampered by feminine concerns. Their final reunion reestablishes Belton as a family man and therefore humanizes him in comparison to the now monomaniacal Bernard. But the reader is left to wonder about Belton's initial and incorrect decision to condemn and abandon his wife and to measure that against his depiction, by Trout, as a man of sterling character.

Reading through the lens of the black power movement, Gloria T. Hull (1978) claims that though "artistically flawed," Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* can be considered a work of "socialist realism" because it "presents a secret, elaborately-organized black 'nation within a nation' which is steadily transforming American society" (151). Though calling the author "ham-handed with symbols," critic Jerry Bryant (1997) claims that Sutton Griggs had a knack for portraying the irreconcilable differences between conservative and radical positions in black politics (91). But where Hull focuses on Grigg's naturalist style, Bryant describes the alternate history aspect of *Imperium in Imperio*: "In a kind of fusion of the John of Revelation and the John Bunyan of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Griggs creates a visionary world in which Bernard Belgrave is revealed as an anguished but fanatical avenger, whose violent plans could ignite an apocalypse which Berl [Trout] 'sees' in his mind's eye."

While the book's narrator takes a final stand against what he sees as an ultimately evil decision to destroy white society, Bryant argues that the text as a whole "warns of the dangers of continued white violence that could ignite a holocaust in the dried tinder of black rage" (92). Neither does Griggs himself seem to take a position, leaving it for the readers to find their own heroes and make their own choices. This authorial decision to withhold judgment and to force the reader into a moral quandary is common to all of the near-future black militant novels discussed in this essay and, indeed, is a feature of the genre. Griggs's work serves as an excellent model for future work, and we will see in the texts discussed below the repetition of the contest between violence and nonviolence. We will also see that the theme of male friendship is central to the genre, as is the marginalization of women and their competing symbolic value. Finally, the act of betrayal is central to each work.

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It is important, for the purposes of this argument, to make the distinction between black near-future fantasy and black near-future science fiction. Fantasy is a genre of its own and deserves serious treatment, but it is distinguished from science fiction because it relies on supernatural or metaphysical means to achieve its ends. Black near-futurist fantasies eschew the “mood and attitude of science” (see Benford’s definition of science fiction above) for the worlds of fable, myth, dreams, magic, and spirituality. Some of the greatest African American writers have worked within this genre, and the alternate worlds they have produced include William Melvin Kelley’s *A Different Drummer* (1962), Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), A. R. Flowers’s *De Mojo Blues* (1986), and Charles Johnson’s *The Middle Passage* (1990). Women writers have been particularly active in employing fantasy in their works and in relying upon spirituality as a means of resolving the tension between violence and nonviolence, particularly in the postsixties era. Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982) all use magic and spiritual transcendence as metaphors for healing the world and making things right.

The genre of black militant near-futurist fiction, however, is built upon the renunciation of that spirituality and belief in magic. In no text in this genre is hard science more celebrated than George Schuyler’s sprawling *Black Empire*, a work never intended for publication in a single volume; it was written in sixty-two installments for the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1936 to 1938. Quite a bit of recent work has been done on Schuyler, both as a figure of the Harlem Renaissance and as a writer, but most of the criticism focuses on Schuyler’s comic masterpiece, *Black No More* (1931). Equally science-focused, *Black No More* tells the story of Junius Crookman, African American doctor and inventor (and genius), and his invention of a medical process that can turn black people whiter than white people. A witty and merciless indictment of all that the young, radical, socialist Schuyler found reprehensible in both black and white culture, the book still appeals to audiences today and has enjoyed a great revival since its republication by Northeastern University Press in 1989. Following the success of *Black No More*, in 1991 Northeastern published a well-researched, painstakingly compiled, and carefully contextualized edition of the collected serial episodes that Schuyler wrote under his own name or his pseudonym, Samuel I. Brooks: “*The Black Internationale*” and “*Black Empire*.” The text was edited by scholars Robert A. Hill and R. Kent Rassmussen, who wrote a lengthy

afterword, and it was introduced by none other than John A. Williams, who places *Black Empire* in a continuum that includes Chester Himes's *Plan B* and his own *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* (Williams 1991, xv).

Williams, who was acquainted with Schuyler in the period after Schuyler's conversion to conservatism and who has many good reasons for not feeling charitably toward the man,¹⁰ finds a single strong point of praise for *Black Empire*, remarking at length on Schuyler's genius as a science fiction writer:

As I read of black ingenuity in these novels, I had the sense that Schuyler must have been reading copiously, including, perhaps, the works of H. G. Wells and the popular science magazines of the day. His Black Internationale intellectuals develop hydroponics or aquicultural farming (growing vegetables in water) in the U.S. and transfer the process to Africa. I don't think this was recognized as a viable method to grow food until the Israelis began to use it, mainly through the drip process, after 1948.

We began to hear about underground aircraft facilities when the Gulf War began early in 1991. The Saudi Arabians had them and it was believed the Iraqis did, too. But we find them in *Black Empire* over half a century earlier. Schuyler's heroes and heroines (ahead of his time there, too) developed what we now call the fax machine, skipping over the telecopier that actually preceded the development of the fax. Television, in its swaddling clothes at the time Schuyler wrote the serials, is fully developed here and used in the closed-circuit mode. Undoubtedly, the conception of solar heat for energy had been considered for some time, if not used in rudimentary form. Schuyler's Black Internationale organization develops and uses solar collectors for the energy needed to run its buildings and machines. Once settled in Africa, its members dine on health foods—almost no meat but plenty of vegetables produced artificially, and no coffee or tea, only natural juice.

On the grimmer side, Schuyler foreshadows the gas chambers the Germans used so prodigiously in World War II, when Martha Gaskin, having gathered the leaders of British industry into a concert hall in London, seals the door and turns on the gas. Similarly, allusions are made in the African scenes to mass euthanasia to rid the race of disease, practiced without benefit of any Nuremberg-like laws. Dr. Belsidus, in the final analysis, is a dictator, a fascist, although his goals are established as moral ones. (xiii–xiv)

In Williams's opinion this seems to be just about all that *Black Empire* has going for it as a literary work, with the single exception of its theme of "revenge, racial redemption and release from white oppression." Missing, Williams argues, is the "mixture of garlic and the tartest possible lemon" that flavored *Black No More*. Absent were "the snakewhip wit and word-play, . . . the perception and sardonicism" that his other published work has shown (xv).

The plot of *Black Empire* is fairly simple, comprised of “setups,” as Williams describes them. Dr. Henry Belsidus (whose name continues the tradition of naming revolutionaries with names that begin with “B”) is an unscrupulous genius utterly dedicated to the proposition of freeing his black brethren from their oppression in the United States and bringing them to well-armed safety in the arms of Mother Africa. Narrated by the initially dubious *Harlem Blade* reporter Carl Slater, each episode further reveals the seemingly limitless powers and resources of the genius Belsidus. Slater resigns his position as reporter in order to devote all of his time to chronicling Belsidus’s life and the growth of the Black Internationale. In *Black Empire* Slater plays the more moderate Belton to Dr. Belsidus’s obsessively focused pro-violence Bernard. In this text, however, the promoter of violence is dark-skinned, with distinctly African features, and his enemies are of all shades, from whites to dark-skinned “race traitors.” The “color line” drawn in *Black Empire* is less subtle than in *Imperium in Imperio*, and it is played out more among the women who compete for Dr. Belsidus’s attention.

Dr. Belsidus is an early example of what both John A. Williams and Chester Himes would later call the “superspade,” the all-powerful black man who is, in *Shaft’s* blaxploitation terms, “a sex magnet with all the chicks.” His potency in the bedroom underlines his effectiveness as a leader. Just as Griggs employed Viola and Antoinette as devices to further his plot and to attribute certain qualities to his protagonist, so Schuyler creates the characters of Martha Gaskin, the beautiful white woman who is devoted to Dr. Belsidus but can never truly possess him, and Patricia Givens, the equally beautiful African American pilot who is Dr. Belsidus’s true match. Gaskin’s role is to emphasize how powerful Dr. Belsidus truly is. As his devoted servant, she works for his revolution and herself engineers the mass gassing of the business class of Britain. Without compunction, she betrays her own people and kills for him. And because he has mastered both white and black women with his superpotency and brilliance, Belsidus is shown to be more masculine and much stronger than white men, who cannot even hold on to their own women. Givens is, for her time, an extremely active and competent black female character. She plans and executes dangerous missions, has the strength to give orders and make them stick, and comes as close as anyone to being the intellectual equal of Belsidus. All of her energy is subsumed in Belsidus’s cause, prefiguring the loyal helpmeet of sixties black militant propaganda.¹¹ That both women survive for the duration of the novels—and presumably beyond—is indication of the stability of Dr. Belsidus’s reign and his power to protect the women under his control. Furthermore, their influence and importance is undermined by the constant presence of the

male narrator. It is to Carl Slater, rather than to either woman, that Belsidus explains his plans, provides his rationalizations, and waxes elaborate about his beliefs and philosophies. It is Carl, in the end, whom Belsidus must convince in order to earn his legitimacy.

The far more radical *Black Empire* has received much less critical attention than *Black No More*—so little attention, in fact, that the refusal to discuss the book seems less accidental than the result of deliberate avoidance. Hill and Rassmussen underline how odd it is that earlier Schuyler scholars like Michael Peplow never uncovered “The Black Internationale” or “Black Empire” serials since Schuyler did publish quite a few of them under his own name. They suggest that any careful researcher could have recovered the work (Schuyler 1991, 255). Peplow (1980) calls Schuyler a “Black Yankee” with “traditional Yankee virtues like self-discipline, independence, thrift and industry.” He sees Schuyler as a “sort of Black Horatio Alger” (18). Had he uncovered these installments, Peplow would have been hard-pressed to maintain that Schuyler’s life followed the trajectory from “youthful idealist” to “pessimistic reactionary” (113), since *Black Empire*’s pessimism is impossible to deny.

Jerry Bryant, who in his 1997 critical study of violence in the African American novel, *Victims and Heroes*, goes out of his way to mention (and condemn) such minor black militant near-futurist texts of the seventies as Chuck Stone’s *King Strut* (1970), Blyden Jackson’s *Operation Burning Candle* (1973), and Nivi-Kofi A. Easley’s *The Militants* (1974), completely ignores the existence of *Black Empire* (in print again, by then, for eight years) despite the fact that Schuyler’s text could serve him well as a model for the later books he discusses. Bryant writes off Schuyler in under two pages, mentioning *Black No More* as a “mordant parody” taking place in a “zany, impossible, pseudo-science fiction world that anticipates Nathaniel West’s mad Horatio Alger travesty, *A Cool Million*” (149). The extreme satire in *Black Empire* contradicts Bryant’s thesis that the hallmark of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance is a recognition of enough “progress” made on “the whole color issue” that lynching is no longer such a pressing matter. *Black Empire* seems to suggest that not only is the oppression of blacks still vigorous in the United States but that African Americans have stored up enough anger and hatred for white people that Schuyler’s serials could attract a devoted readership whose interest kept the series alive for two years. One may imagine that these readers, who were not themselves revolutionaries, or even necessarily supporters of violence, took a certain pleasure in imagining white people getting their comeuppance at the hands of a black genius and his army.

Some conservative critics, like Mark Gauvreau Judge, left *Black Empire* alone because they couldn’t assimilate it. Judge praised Schuyler

and *Black No More* in an article in *Policy Review* in 2000. Lauding Schuyler for his anticommunism, Judge calls him “the Black Whittaker Chambers” (41). Then he condemns the “liberal elites” who control the media for keeping Schuyler out of the limelight for so long. Although *Black Empire* had been available for over a decade at the time Judge wrote the review and even the most cursory research would have made him aware of its existence, he omits any mention of the book. *Black Empire* is a text so radical that its mere existence would disqualify Schuyler as a candidate for the Hall of Good Negroes, in which Judge is attempting to mount his head.

Some criticism (including Williams’s) indicts *Black Empire* for its apparent lack of humor, particularly when compared to the easily accessible satire in *Black No More*. But it is hardly possible that Schuyler wrote this work straight-faced, and much more probable that he found the process uproarious, as he claimed in a letter to the *Courier* staff: “I have been greatly amused by the public enthusiasm for ‘The Black Internationale,’ which is hokum and hack work of the purest vein. I deliberately set out to crowd as much race chauvinism and sheer improbability into it as my fertile imagination could conjure. The result vindicates my low opinion of the human race” (Schuyler 1991, 260).

Though even Robert Hill and R. Kent Rassmussen lament *Black Empire*’s lack of the “droll humor characteristic of *Black No More*,” it is far from clear that the text is indeed humorless. The sheer outrageousness of the events described, the unbelievable volume of violence and abuse meted out to whites by blacks, the hyperbolic style and the seeming omnipotence of Dr. Belsidus all suggest that few African American readers of the day could sit there and consume these serials straight-faced. In this sense *Black Empire* filled the same function as its pulp peers: escapist fantasy combined with underlying cultural critique, designed for a public dissatisfied with their lived reality. If we judge *Black Empire* in this light we are not limited to discussing its literary merit; rather, we can begin to consider the attraction that the kill-the-white-people fantasy has for black Americans and to understand its implications. This may be deeply uncomfortable for black and white critics alike, most of whom do not seem inclined to acknowledge that this level of hostility may exist.

White Critics and the Black Militant Near-Future Novel

Chester Himes never seemed to have any problem admitting the level of hatred and distrust he had for white people, and that may, in part, be the reason that his literary work has been given far less attention than it

deserves. It is certainly the reason why he left the United States forever and went to Europe. At a lecture titled “Dilemma of the Negro Novelist in the United States,” Himes told his audience:

To hate white people is one of the first emotions an American Negro develops when he becomes old enough to learn what his status is in American Society. He must, of necessity, hate white people. He would not be—and it would not be human if he did not—develop a hatred for his oppressors. At some time in the lives of every American Negro there has been this hatred for white people; there are no exceptions. It could not possibly be otherwise. (Quoted in Lundquist 1976, 16)

His audience, Himes recalls in his autobiography, sat in stunned silence. He had broken a deep taboo and no one knew how to respond. Yet his voice was only the first of many that would swell into a full chorus crescendo in the late sixties and early seventies. Himes’s *Plan B* and John A. Williams’s *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* are only two parts of a far larger whole comprised of the farthest-out kill-the-white-folks fantasies of the black militant literary movement.

That white people were bound to misunderstand black militant near-future novels was assured. Their general ignorance of black culture guaranteed that black satire aimed at black audiences would simply not make it onto their radar. A tendency to take literature (especially literature by minorities) literally, an uncritical acceptance of racial stereotypes, and a lack of facility with the brilliant pyrotechnics of African American vernacular made it likely that few white readers would see these novels as anything other than trashy, cartoonish, and crude. Most white critics totally ignored their existence.

Of the few who did not, Jerry Bryant serves as an excellent example of the sort of misreading that is made possible by privileging preconceived notions over cultural immersion. Bryant begins with Toni Morrison’s description of the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*:

There is a society. It’s made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don’t initiate anything; they don’t even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can.¹²

Bryant quotes this passage to illustrate “the imagery that emerged in the mid-1960s in the African American novel of violence. It is at this point, he asserts, that the organized revolutionary group becomes a popular way to express the anger of many black Americans” (1997, 237). But both

Griggs and Schuyler have been down this road before, over a half a century earlier, and it is curious that although Bryant is demonstrably familiar with the works of both authors (and it is unlikely that he never came across Schuyler's *Black Empire*), he chooses to overlook the existence of pre-1960s novels of armed revolution.

Bryant's biases leads him to grossly miscategorize the novels he discusses, lumping together serious black militant novels like John Oliver Killens's *Sippi* (1967) with seriocomic extravaganzas like Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by The Door* (1969), Chuck Stone's *King Strut* (1970), Blyden Jackson's *Operation Burning Candle* (1973), and Nivi-Kofi A. Easley's *The Militants* (1974) (248–50). He entirely misses the satirical and playful aspects of these black militant texts. Written in the era immediately preceding and during the explosion of the blaxploitation film, it seems both disingenuous and completely wrong-headed to read them as “straight” novels.

Bryant devotes much of *Victims and Heroes* to mustering arguments to challenge African American critic Addison Gayle, with whom he clearly has a bone to pick. Bryant's a shill for universalism and “great” literature. He therefore contests Gayle's assertion that there are uniquely black qualities in literature, and that the best black literature relies on those qualities and rejects white ideas and interpretations. Most of all, he fights against the idea that African American culture has inherent worth, unrelated to the “universal” messages of its “greatest” authors. His blindness to the black aesthetic ensures that he will misread the very novels that he chooses to use as ammunition in his attempt to undermine Gayle.

Bryant so misunderstands Gayle and is so unfamiliar with black culture—particularly black humor—that he mistakes outrageous, satirical, and ironic examples of wildly exaggerated street-culture-meets-over-the-top-fantasy novels for the serious works of literary naturalism that Gayle praises. Bryant makes the same mistake with much of the black power rhetoric he quotes. The Panthers used the hyperbolic rhetoric of the street (dozens, signifyin') with the same panache they donned their black leather coats, tilted their black berets, and publicly shouldered their guns. To miss this *is* to miss black culture—not a surprising mistake on Bryant's part, since he insists on his right to view it entirely through white lenses.

It's hard to imagine Bryant attempting to place potboiler romances or pulp science fiction novels in the same continuum as “literary” works if he were working with mainstream white literature. But Bryant apparently places all African American novels in the same category and then ranks them from “good” to “bad.” An astute critic would recognize that these black militant futurist or alternative present novels actually did belong to a different genre than self-consciously literary creations by established

authors like John A. Williams. It would make far more sense to connect these kill-the-white-people black militant novels to the seriocomic tradition established by comics like Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory and by the outrageously funny examples of critique and commentary offered by Dolemite than to the literary tradition of the black novelist. As Darius James, a young black teenager in the years encompassing the publication of Greenlee, Moreau, Easley, and the like explains in *That's Blaxploitation! Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude*: "My teenage agenda was simple. 1. Get high. 2. Overthrow the U.S. government. 3. And fuck big-boobed white girls" (1995, xix). James is ironic both about his agenda and about the genre that he says shaped his youthful ideals—blaxploitation. He, or young men like him, were likely consumers of these black militant novels, perhaps in part because the comic book tradition lacked a decent supply of black superheroes. Black militant novels, like blaxploitation films, speak with a double tongue, despite their seeming Simplicity.¹³

Plan B and Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light

It is with Bryant's misinterpretation in mind that I'd like to approach Himes's *Plan B* and Williams's *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*. Both books were written during approximately the same period. Although Himes's *Plan B* was not published until after his death in 1984, the book was substantially finished by 1971, with only minor changes in the ensuing years. It is thus better read as a product of the earlier era. Both Williams and Himes published novels the critics liked far better. Bryant, for example, waxes rhapsodic about Williams's earlier work, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967):

The Man Who Cried I Am is not an opportunistic exploitation of a chic market fashion, nor is it a puerile fantasy. It is an attempt to make meaning out of a set of events that Williams would rather not have to face. . . . There is no stereotypical black militancy in this novel. . . . Williams does not resort to simple reversal or get any vindictive pleasure in imagining the deaths of whites or the superior ability of blacks to kill. Melancholy pervades this novel, not heroic anger or righteous resentment or revolutionary fervor. (1997, 255–56)

Bryant declares *The Man Who Cried I Am* "one of the best American novels of the decade" (252). What seems to particularly attract him is its message that despite their victimization at the hands of whites, "African Americans can be as petty and self-serving, grasping and self-centered, as anyone else" (256). As far as Bryant is concerned, this is one more nail in

the coffin of the black aesthetic. Since many black militant novels make the same point (Schuyler, for one, is a master of the intraracial lampoon), it is hard to see this as a real distinction between Williams's work and the work of other authors described in this essay. More likely, the literary qualities of *The Man Who Cried I Am* make the book more accessible to a critic such as Bryant. And perhaps, also, that is why Bryant reduces his critique of *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* to a single paragraph, describing protagonist Eugene Browning as an "heir" to Max Reddick, the protagonist of *The Man Who Cried I Am*.

While Max Reddick does not commit himself to violence before he is killed, Eugene Browning "concludes, only with reluctance, that violent confrontation is necessary. Blacks have exhausted every other recourse and want desperately to make their country healthy, to heal the division between races. Violence is like the shock treatment one authorizes for a beloved relative" (257). This plot places the book squarely into the larger category of black militant novels he despises and perhaps provides an explanation for Bryant's reluctance to dwell on it.

Critics did recognize the book as futurist fiction, and most of them noted the near-future setting in their reviews. Earl Cash, in his study of Williams (1975), says of the book:

Sons of Darkness, *Sons of Light* . . . presents the black man's response to the white treachery in *The Man Who Cried I Am*. Max Reddick had concluded that interracial conflict was inevitable. Browning not only recognizes the inevitability of the conflict but begins preparing himself for a role in that conflict. It is fitting, too, that the story takes place in the future. The author had described in past books what was to come if whites did not respond to black cries for justice. In *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* the clash begins in 1973, the not-too-distant future from the vantage point of 1969. (109–10)

Gilbert Muller, in his own study (1984), underlines the importance of the future setting in encouraging the reader to believe that action may still be taken to prevent the nation from coming to such a pass: "*Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* is subtitled, 'A Novel of Some Probability.' What Williams describes is indeed probable, and the book may serve the dual purpose of warning whites of what may be imminent if black/white relations are not improved as well as warning blacks of the pitfalls of which they must beware if they decide to rebel" (112).

Williams's credentials as a naturalist writer are well established, as John M. Reilly (1987) demonstrates in his scholarly work on *The Man Who Cried I Am*. According to Muller, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light* (1969), and *Captain Blackman* (1972) comprise a trilogy that can be compared to the great work of another Ameri-

can naturalist writer: John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Muller remarks, "Dos Passos is one of the few writers to whom Williams will acknowledge a literary debt" (1984, xiii).

Williams also admits, in an unpublished autobiographical sketch in 1978, that he had a youthful fascination with pulp fiction and read "anything . . . by [Edgar Rice] Burroughs" (Muller 1984, 5, n. 7). Williams saw *Sons of Darkness* as a sort of pulp novel as well, describing it in terms reminiscent of Schuyler discussing *Black Empire*:

Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light in many ways was a pot boiler for me anyhow. I sat down and wrote it comparatively quickly compared to my other books. This was a reaction to my continued poverty after *The Man Who Cried I Am* came along. . . . So I sat down and wrote this book. I think it's one of my worst novels. It brought in more paperback money than *The Man Who Cried I Am*. . . . The things that are crap or tend to be crap . . . always for some reason do better. (Quoted in Cash 1975, 138)

The contest between violence and nonviolence in *Sons of Darkness* is played out, once again, between two old friends. Eugene Browning (yet another revolutionary beginning with "B"—it is getting hard to believe that this is all coincidence) is a college professor who decides to quit his teaching job to work for a civil rights organization, the Institute for Racial Justice, full-time. The pro-violence and anti-violence roles in this novel are delegated to several different characters who represent various positions. Don Mantini is the Italian godfather who, curious about Browning's decision to hire a hit man to kill a racist police officer, decides to meet with Browning anonymously. The two develop a friendship, though Browning is unaware of Mantini's identity. Mantini shares with Browning his theoretical knowledge about the implications of violence and admires Browning for his commitment and passion. In comparison to a criminal world where people kill for profit and revenge, Browning looks distinctly noble.

If one thinks of Mantini as murder's upper-level management, then the second important character, Itzhak Hod, is a member of its working class. Hod, an Israeli, is an assassin, a "plumber" for the mob, a tragicomic figure cogently described by Muller: "A Polish Jew who has fought and killed anti-Semites, Fascists, Nazis, Arabs, and an assortment of political victims all his life, Hod is a killer with a heart and soul. He is an internationalist who carries with him . . . the horrors of the twentieth century. Hod is the philosopher of death, the connoisseur of killing" (1984, 91–92).

Browning also has lesser relationships, one with Jessup, a black militant who has worked out a bizarre arrangement with the John Birch Society (perhaps a reference to the young Schuyler, who Williams claims

embraced conservatism far earlier than is thought, and who did, in fact, have a relationship with the John Birch Society) (Williams 1991, xiv). He interacts with two other black revolutionaries and winds up imprisoning one of them, Leonard Trotman, in a closet over Labor Day weekend to ensure that Trotman can't inform on a bombing.

Betrayal is, without doubt, one of the major themes in this novel. It is, in Williams's estimation, part of contemporary black militant culture:

In the first place—it may be a Black thing. I don't know—we seem to abhor secrecy. You can't have a militant black group in this country unless it's infiltrated. It's just impossible. The only groups you can have that are valid and functioning and haven't done anything yet are those that operated in total secrecy. We just don't seem to be able to pull that off. I think that's what's totally necessary in this society that is shot through with surveillance systems, peoples, codes, and so forth. (Quoted in Muller 1984, 94)

Political and personal betrayals abound in *Sons of Darkness*. Browning's daughter Nora betrays him by dating a white boy. Carrigan, the doomed police officer, betrays his wife with another woman. Browning betrays his old friend Herb Dixon for money to fund his scheme to assassinate the white police officer. Browning betrays Trotman by locking him in the closet. And when Browning returns home at the end of the novel he finds he's been betrayed by his wife Val, who is having an affair.

The women in the novel carry the moral weight in terms of judging character and intent. It is Itzhak Hod, oddly enough, who winds up playing Belton's role and giving up his career as an assassin to settle with his young wife, Mickey, in Israel. Mickey's love redeems him and gives him the strength and security to make a decision he knows is correct. Val's affair is a judgment on Browning's withdrawal, and it ceases as soon as he returns and asserts himself as her husband. Williams's women, though sometimes more sympathetically drawn, have no more agency than in other works in the genre.

Williams has an intimate connection to the final novel I wish to discuss. Chester Himes was "one of his favorite writers and friends" (Muller 1984, 31), and Himes discussed the writing of *Plan B* with Williams in interviews and personal correspondence. Williams called Himes "our single greatest naturalist writer" (quoted in Sallis 2000, 226) but waxes ambivalent about the author's posthumous publication:

Plan B remains a puzzle to me, because it does not begin to make clear the crucial, connected point Himes discussed back then: "It's a calculated risk, you know, whether they would try to exterminate the black man, which I don't think they could do. I don't think the Americans have the capacity, like

the Germans, of exterminating six million. I don't think the white American man could. Morally, I don't think he could do this." I characterized that as a "jive morality." I disagreed with Himes then and do now. Only once in *Plan B* does the author arrive at this point, where American morality is put to the test, in a couple of lines of dialogue at the novel's strange and disappointing end. And this is precisely why I believe the book will always be an incomplete testimony to his beliefs. (1996, 492)

In *Plan B* the brilliant Tommson Black¹⁴ (a revolutionary rather than a Dr. Belsidus-style fascist) conceives of and funds a plan to distribute weapons to African Americans in the hopes that they will mount a revolution directed by Black's organization, Chitterlings, Inc. The novel also represents the conclusion of Himes's Harlem detective cycle since it ends in the death of both protagonists: Grave Digger kills Coffin Ed, and Tommson Black kills Grave Digger. The plot, as Williams and other reviewers note, is not well constructed. In fact it's pretty well nonexistent, and *Plan B* is more easily read as a montage of fragments, some more developed than others, from at least two potential novels. Most compelling are the individual scenes of murder and mayhem and seemingly random violence. Or rather, the violence is seemingly random only to the uneducated white observer:

It is the accumulation of past deeds that is the trigger, and therein lies the foundation of absurdity of the novel. For most white people the past is over and done with; but for most black people it is the past that has made them what they are; they know white people will never release them from the past because they cannot do so without losing the misplaced belief in their superiority. But this past is there, as it must be, or the present doesn't exist, all of which is, of course, absurd. The remembrance of things past is nothing if not everything. (Williams 1996, 493)

Despite the fragmentary and episodic nature of the novel, the tension between violence and nonviolence—or in this case, the tension between more violence and less violence—is certainly palpable at the end. As Williams says, this last scene tells us clearly that there is “the Grave Digger way, the Coffin Ed way, or the Tommson Black way” (493), and they are mutually exclusive and they each require a betrayal.

Even the female characters partake of the general madness and violence in the novel. In the opening and perhaps most powerful chapter, a rifle is delivered to a Harlem apartment. The woman of the couple, Tang, is excited by the rifle and the note that accompanies it: “WARNING!! DO NOT INFORM POLICE!!! LEARN YOUR WEAPON AND WAIT FOR INSTRUCTIONS!!! . . . FREEDOM IS NEAR!!!” Her man, T-bone,

is terrified and wants to turn the rifle in. They get into an altercation over the rifle and Tang threatens to shoot him if he calls the police. When he makes a grab for the rifle she pulls the trigger, but the gun is unloaded. In a blind rage he slashes her to death. And in the final scene, after Black has executed Grave Digger, a beautiful black woman walks into the room looks around the room and asks Black why he committed the murder. She listens to his response and her words are the final words of the book: “I hope you know what you’re doing” (Himes 1993, 203). These women represent a radical departure from the archetypal woman in Himes’s earlier novels, who tended to be a “seductive, curvy, amoral sex-pot with very light skin” (Skinner 1989, 22). Both of the dark-skinned women undermine male authority. The first pays for it with her life, but the second gets the last word. In *Plan B* the whole world is turned on its head.

It is useful, at this point, to remember what Himes had to say about the absurd nature of racism and about absurdity in general:

Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of racism, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum. If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life. (Quoted in Muller 1989, 11)

Black militant near-future fiction is a genre that lends itself to the expression of that absurdity. To read it without knowledge or understanding of African American culture is to miss its meaning and, most important, to fail to get the jokes.

Slip the Yoke

In this essay I’ve argued for the definition of a new subgenre of African American science fiction: the black militant near-future novel. I’ve examined four works that fall comfortably within the genre and mentioned several more that could easily be included. The black militant near-future novel falls within both the African American and the naturalist literary traditions and meets the definitions of science fiction as well. Works belonging to this subgenre generally focus on a future in which African Americans engage in armed rebellion against their white oppressors, and they feature the following themes: secret societies, charismatic leaders, tension between positions of violence and nonviolence, differing status among African Americans (often symbolized by skin color), and marginalization

of women characters, whose sole purpose is to further the plot and enhance our understanding of the protagonist.

These novels often make use of low-tech solutions to problems of supply, organization, and maintenance of revolutionary organizations, focusing on human relationships rather than always using cutting-edge technology. In this sense, they are related to other contemporary science fiction works outside the subgenre by black American writers, including Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Steven Barnes, whose works also reflect the sensibility described by Lerone Bennett early in this article: technology as “instruments and not ends,” useful for their “generative power,” but lacking in the soul that provides the African American aesthetic with its unique power. It is my hope that the description of this subgenre provided in this article will both illuminate and clarify some of the long-neglected works of black militant writers and will help critics to reclaim these works and to situate them within the various traditions upon which they draw.

The soundtrack for this essay has been Anthony Braxton, Charlie Mingus, Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler. During breaks from writing I'd put Richard Pryor in the CD player. In an amazing moment of synchronicity, I happened to choose *That Nigger's Crazy*, and it came around to the “Flying Saucers” routine. I'd forgotten all about it, and yet when it kicked in it meshed perfectly with what I've been trying to get across in this article—that mix of truth and laughter and attitude and pain. It's the perfect note to conclude on. Pryor starts out by imitating and making fun of white folks, who are amazed, frightened, and impressed when they see a flying saucer. In contrast: “Nothing can scare a nigger, after four hundred years of this shit. . . . The Martian ain't got a chance. A nigger'd warn a Martian, ‘You better get your ass away from around here. You done landed on Mr. Gilmore's property.’ Martian landed in New York the niggers'd take his shit from him. ‘You got to give up the flying saucer baby.’”

Notes

1. The genre of African American science fiction is just beginning to be defined and explored. For a groundbreaking work on the subject, see Thomas 2000.

2. Definition of naturalism from *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 2d ed.

3. James E. Gunn, introduction to *The Road to Science Fiction*, vol. 1, (New York: New English Library, 1977), quoted in Gökçe 2001.

4. Lerone Bennett, *The Negro Mood*, quoted in Henderson 1969, 115–16.

5. This brings to mind the scene in *Beverly Hills Cop* in which Eddie Murphy makes it past the protective executive secretary and into her boss's office by

pretending to be a deliveryman. “Floral delivery is my life,” he says as he moves smoothly past her.

6. If you know of one, please let me know. You may reach me via e-mail at kali@kalital.com.

7. Martin Delany, *Blake*, quoted in Bryant 1997, 39.

8. American National Biography Database, www.library.pitt.edu/resources/database_info/anb. (30 June 2001).

9. E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1898), Bartleby.com, www.bartleby.com/81/8779.html (28 June 2001).

10. Williams mentions that Schuyler gave him a number of poor reviews for his books, and the two were deeply opposed politically.

11. For an excellent overview of women’s roles in the civil rights and black power movements, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Random House, 1980). For a first-person detailed narrative detailing women’s roles in the Black Panthers, see Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power* (New York: Anchor, 1994).

12. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, quoted in Bryant 1997, 237.

13. I am thinking, as I capitalize this term, of Langston Hughes’s Simple stories, which illustrate the double-voiced nature of African American rhetoric.

14. Yet another protagonist whose name begins with a “B.” It would be difficult, at this point, to make an argument for coincidence. This consistency supports the argument that the later authors of the novels under discussion saw themselves as part of a distinct and particular conversation within the African American literary tradition. Himes, whose lack of subtlety has been widely noted, simply declares what the “B” stands for: black.

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