

THE MAMMY, THE BREEDER AND THE RACE WOMAN:  
STORYTELLING AS SUBVERSION IN SELECTED NOVELS BY  
CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

By

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DEDICATION

To

LaLeta, Nannie M., and Westel

For My Voice and The Will to Speak

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Sincerest appreciation to my director Dr. Laura Dubek for taking this journey with me and gifting me with the mantra “She persisted.”

## ABSTRACT

Audre Lorde categorized her semi-autobiographical novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, published in 1982, as biomythography. In doing so, Lorde suggested a new genre of writing that challenges the boundaries of existing genres, particularly for Black women writers. Lorde's unique method of storytelling utilizes elements of traditional biography as well as the history of myth, this combination constituting a "new spelling" of her name. Since 1982, the term biomythography has become a sort of umbrella for many types of feminist (auto)biographical writing. With close readings of three novels by contemporary black women writers—Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*—I argue that work currently considered in the genre of Afrofuturism should instead be read as biomythography. Naylor, Butler, and Okorafor all do the work of biomythography by foregrounding, in fiction, the rich inner lives of Black women in a way that directly challenges two dominant myths of Black womanhood—the mammy and the breeder—and, in Okorafor's case, reclaims and rewrites the narrative of the Race Woman. Reading these novels as biomythography foregrounds the ways Black women writers use dissemblance to radically reimagine identity, or "new spellings" of their names. My readings open up new lines of critical inquiry for these individual texts while also calling for both a broader definition of biomythography and more attention to it as a genre particular to Black women's writing.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“To name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves.”

Lorrain O’Grady, 1994

Storytellers enact the mythology upon which our actions and interactions are based. As Yuval Noah Harari explains in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), “Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths. Any large-scale human cooperation—whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe—is rooted in common myths that exist only in people’s collective imagination” (32). The prevailing mythology surrounding the Black woman’s body violently erased any resemblance of selfhood or humanity from the image of Black womanhood. In colonial America, the body of the Black woman became what Janell Hobson in *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005) refers to as the “locus for various anxieties of racial and sexual encounters during [this] unsettling period of economic, political and social revolutions.” Her body created the products of the “global economies of the African slave trade and European expansion” (21). It was critical at this time, when the New World was in its infancy to imagine the Black woman’s body in relation to a manufactured hierarchical order. This order assigned to “diverse plants animals and people” positions that created “theories of race and gender differences that enhanced global white masculinist imperialism” (31). In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination* (1992) Toni Morrison clarifies the effect this imagining had on American literature. Morrison explains that American literature responded by introducing a “carefully observed, and carefully invented,

Africanist presence.” This presence was indicative of the “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples [came] to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (10). She explains that for those immigrants who had left the mother country to create the New World “constraint and limitation had impelled the journey.” The Americas had offered an escape from “poverty, prison and social ostracism.” It was seen as a place in which “one could move from discipline and punishment to disciplining and punishing; from social ostracism to social rank...a blank page waiting to be inscribed” (24). Through the pillaged bodies of Black women, these dreams were realized. But the memory of their poverty and low rank in the Old World made the immigrants turn colonizers and slave owners ever vigilant about the possibility of overthrow or rebellion. It created in their collective imagination “a dark and abiding presence that moved [their] hearts and texts with fear and longing...a haunting, a darkness from which early [American] literature seems unable to extricate itself” (33). To soothe itself, this fear and longing imagined the Mammy character as the matrix of this “dark, abiding, signing African presence” in American literature (5).

In her book-length analysis of how canonical white writers “played” in the “dark” spaces of this imagination, Morrison explains that Black bodies were assigned a projection of “a fabrication of darkness, otherness, alarm” (20). Black female bodies as the point of origin for this “otherness” were positioned in terms of grotesquerie and imagined as carnivalesque. This white construction subverted the fear of a Black majority because it imagined enslaved Africans as content with existence in their “rightful place” in the natural order. Within this order, Black women’s bodies were imagined as

compliant tools for imperialism. Hobson explains that, as Mammy the imagination could allow for the fabricated “carnavalesque body to coexist with normalized bodies as the grotesque supports—indeed enhances—the status quo” (11). Mammy is the only space the Black female body can hold in the white collective imagination. As such, this caricature became the foundation from which all subsequent characterizations of Black womanhood were gleaned. The role of Mammy is Black womanhood imagined in its proper place. It is the wild, grotesque savagery of Blackness and femaleness brought completely to heel.

In the wake of the violence done to them by this discourse, Black women protected the only part of themselves they could conceal, their rich inner lives. They created a culture of dissemblance. Darlene Clark Hine, professor of African American studies and history, named this phenomena in “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” (1989). Hine explains that the institutionalized rape and acts of violence against Black women “influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Black women...behavior and attitudes that created the appearance of openness...but shielded the truth of their... selves from their oppressors” (22). Hine notes that “every 19<sup>th</sup> century female slave narrative contains a reference to the ever-present threat and reality of rape...few scholars have probed the effect that rape, the threat of rape and domestic violence had on the psychic development of [little Black girls]” (45). She says, “the relationship between Black women and the larger society has always been and continues to be adversarial. Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions and gender role differentiation Black women as a rule developed and adhere to a cult of secrecy.” She continues, “the dynamics of dissemblance involved



creating the appearance of openness about themselves and their feelings while remaining an enigma.” This culture allowed them to “achieve a self-imposed invisibility and accrue the psychic space and harness the resources to hold their own in a mismatched resistance struggle” (51).

Black female artists experienced this sacred psychic space “as a black hole [which] was not a void but a dense and full place ...detected by its effects on the region where it is located.” This space was constructed as “an alternative universe...a different cosmos in which the Black body can be visualized” (Hobson 16). In this space, Black women regained the position of spectator. From this sanctuary, Black women were afforded the opportunity to reclaim their subjectivity. Within this subjectivity, they exercised a protective, self-centering gaze. Engaging this gaze from the safe space of their psychic sanctuaries, Black female artists were able to reckon with, envision and be inspired by their unencumbered selves. This analysis gave them leave to define themselves outside of the Mammy and Breeder tropes. Through this radical act of self-definition, Black women writers granted themselves the luxury of telling their own stories from their own unique perspective. Speaking from the perspective of their inner lives, Black female writers expounded upon the mysticism and multi-dimensional experience that punctuates Black life. Stories told from this perspective can be categorized as Afrofuturist.

To explore Afrofuturism as it relates to my project, I am using, Ytasha Womack’s definition from *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013); “the union of imagination, mysticism, liberation, Black culture and technology.”

Womack contends that “when we use our imagination to create the world we want to create we are given a sense of agency” (58). Womack’s definition echoes Audre Lorde’s explanation of biomythography. In *Zami*, Lorde described biomythography as writing that “has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision” (5). It is also quite similar to Nnedi Okorafor’s contention in “Fantasy Girls: An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu” (2009) that “to be African is to merge magic and technology” (71). In presenting Black cultural imaginings to the world at large, Womack explains that Afrofuturism “disorients and highlights the lack of representations and in doing so allows the audience to re-imagine their beliefs and understandings.” Further, Womack asserts, the experiences push the audience to “break past some limitations of identity and question [their] sense of reality and the commonly accepted paradigm” (72).

My contention with Afrofuturism is that it does not acknowledge the mysticism inherent in Black life and erroneously relegates it to fantasy. Mysticism in Black art arises from the African experience of time as a cyclical continuum including what has happened, what is happening and what has yet to happen. Okorafor explains: “when we talk about ‘realism,’ in ‘African literature,’ [we must be aware that] in many African cultures, the idea of the mystical and the mundane being combined—is a natural thing. So, writing something that was fantastical was natural to me. I never thought of it as ‘fantasy’ . . . I was writing memoir, and the fantastical aspects of those stories naturally occurred there” (13).

Twelve years before Mark Drery coined the term Afrofuturism, Audre Lorde referred to this form of expression as biomythography. As exhibited in *Zami*, biomythography is the uninhibited flow that occurs when a Black woman tells her story. It is informed by that rich inner life the Black woman retreated into to elude destruction. A Black woman standing and telling her own story speaks from the psychic sanctuary of her inner self. The novels I will discuss—Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, and Nnedi Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix*—belong in the genre of biomythography because each one acknowledges the mystical elements inherent in Black life and speak specifically to Black women’s way of seeing, experiencing and talking about a thing.

I will build my argument for the inclusion of select Black feminist novels by using *Zami* as the definitive biomythography. Primarily, it is writing that celebrates Black female wildness. It frees the Black female body from being characterized by tropes that were designed to destroy, deny and punish its organic state. *Zami* accomplishes this through unapologetic Black lesbian eroticism and constant references to the realities of living in a body that is Black and female. Additionally, biomythography shatters the common conventions of genres and disciplines. *Zami* dissolves the boundaries of fiction, biography and mythology. Lorde achieves this by writing a biographical work of fiction in which she reconstructs mythological characters. Doing so allows readers to experience the full range and timbre of the voice of the Black woman. This voice is steeped in alternate mythologies in that its timbre and tone are born from the storytelling traditions of Black mothers. Lorde makes it clear in the prologue that she speaks as the “I” who can “elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter,

with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed” (8).

Which brings us to the third element of biomythography as exhibited by *Zami*:

unapologetically speaking in the autonomous voice of the Black woman. The genre frees the Black female voice from the constraints of Mammydom. The text is Lorde’s experiences as she lived them. Rosemary Daniell, who reviewed *Zami* for the *New York Times* when it was first published in 1982 explains that, “to read it is to feel that one has lived Audre Lorde’s life” (6). Lorde writes one of the most subversive pieces of American literature by speaking from the safe psychic space of dissemblance. In *Zami*, Lorde details how she was legally blind from birth and refused to speak until she was four. These circumstances necessitated the creation of a rich inner world. *Zami* is written from this unique point of view.

Using *Zami* as a barometer, biomythography is writing in any genre that focuses on the lived experience of Black women. It is a Black woman telling the story of her experiences from her own unique vantage point. Through it, the audience is introduced to the fully actualized voice of the Black woman, speaking unapologetically. It is a form of narrative that is indicative of the ability of the Black woman to “hold up a mirror that reveals an alternative image of herself, free from the iconographic history in dominant culture” (Hobson 65). As Aph Ko stated in “Why Afrofuturism is a Black Feminist Praxis” (2015) Lorde created a genre in which Black women can freely “imagine and create new social worlds where [she] could be [her] own agent, where every second of [her] life wasn’t a quest to fight white supremacist representations of [her] body” (22).

By writing *Zami*, Lorde defined the genre as a manifestation of the personal as political and as a testament to the reality that art that defines self, created by the disenfranchised, is revolutionary. It is a reminder that as the Cohambee River Collective declared in 1977, “Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted it in both dramatic and subtle ways” (2). The genre is born of the idea that this same organization put forth : “Black women are inherently valuable; that our [self-expression] exists not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy” (2). Biomythography makes clear “the ways in which Black women have been seen and not seen by the dominant society and [also] how they see themselves in a different landscape” (Hobson 15).

In “Black Girls Are from the Future” (2012), Susana Morris explains that much of speculative fiction reiterates “the anxieties mainstream culture has with our current multicultural society by seeking to ‘reinstate’ the supremacy of whiteness.” Morris claims that what she refers to as “Afrofuturist feminist novels” offer “a Black feminist Afrofuturist epistemology that transgressively revises contemporary genre(s) by reconfiguring trope(s) to consider how race, sexuality, and intimacy can function in potentially progressive ways” (162). Afrofuturist feminist novels, categorized as biomythographies for the purpose of this work, “radically reimagine identity.” The texts “illuminate epistemologies that underscore the importance of transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy” (154). The genre removes Black bodies from being imagined as “harbingers of social chaos and collapse” (Morrison 12). Instead, its narratives “recover the histories of counter-futures.” Constructing the future from a Black female

perspective. The assertion being that “not only will Blacks exist in the future” but “Blacks fundamentally are the future and Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society” (Morris 2).

Springing from the psychic space of Black women writers, biomythographies naturally “transgressively revise genres, reconfigure tropes and radically reimagine identity,” in the way Morris mentions. In doing so they allow the audience a foray into previously forbidden territory—an experience that “disorients, disrupts and allows them to question and then re-imagine the commonly accepted paradigm” (Morris 154). This begins to “uncouple dominance from power” and “makes new life and new growth possible.” It is not “simply about replacing the dominant voice with the voice of the marginalized; rather liberation is cast in terms of coalition and power sharing; methodologies that would incite a future quite different from the hegemony of present structures” (152). In short, if the current narrative only imagines fulfillment for one percent of the population, let us engage a different narrative that can imagine fulfillment for us all.

*Dawn* (1987), *Mama Day* (1988) and *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) reconfigure the tropes surrounding the Black female body and should be read as biomythographical novels. The novels radically reimagine the Breeder and the Mammy tropes. Like *Zami*, none of the novels is biographical in the traditional sense. But like Lorde, each of the authors admits to speaking from a biographical place in her writing. Butler is often quoted for having said of her writing in a *New York Times* interview in 2000, “Since I’m here and I’m me and I’m writing. I can write myself in.” Naylor says in an NPT

*American Masters* special in 2007, that her novels are the result of her parents encouraging her with “dreams of self-actualization and to try to attain a sense of [her] own full humanity.” Okorafor tells her interviewer that she is “writing memoir” (13). Each novel transgressively revises the genre of speculative fiction. Each narrative is conceived within and nourished by the rich inner lives of Black women. Each allows the objectified Black female body to be experienced as a full Black female self. Reckoning with this experience incites change.

Current scholarship on biomythography focuses on what the genre achieves. Specifically, the genre is cited for its ability to provide a forum for queer, Black feminist and various “othered” writers. This work is essential to changing outdated narratives and reconstructing harmful tropes and therefore related to my assertions about biomythography. However, it differs from my thesis in that my focus is on the origin of biomythography as a style of writing and the circumstances that made this style of writing necessary. Released in 1982, *Zami* was published during a time when there was a dearth of literature centering Black lesbians. Coming out narratives had become popular in the 1970’s, but due to the culture of dissemblance, which accounts for Black women’s traditional silence in the areas of personal narratives and specifically sexual narratives, *Zami* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) have the distinction of being the first widely distributed literature of this kind. As such, *Zami* was ground-breaking in both form and content. Therefore, literary scholars’ fascination with what the novel was and is able to achieve for marginalized communities is understandable and laudable. Through *Zami* biomythography does the revolutionary work of making space for writers who

previously had no place. This aspect of the novel, because of its far-reaching implications, is generally the focal point of critiques and analyses.

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, discuss the ability of biomythography to provide safe non-racialized space for Black feminists to resist oppression and for white feminists to confront their privilege and thereby bridge the gap between them in “The Whole Story is What I’m After: Womanist Revolutions and Liberation Feminist Revelations Through Biomythography and Emancipatory Historiography” (2005). The contention of the article is that biomythography and emancipatory historiography “a method of historical inquiry that unearths the foundations of structural oppression” (185), provide the “whole story” of Black and white women’s oppression and using these tools allows feminists from both racial backgrounds to unite for the common purpose of dismantling patriarchy. Biomythography is touted for its ability to “construct a liberatory ethic” (177) as well as the fact that it “created a subjective space that centered on [Black women’s] own survival and empowerment” (180). The authors explain that this was necessary and healing for Black women as it granted them the luxury of refusing to be “judged by the values of another culture” and the privilege of standing “within a self-articulated imagery alone.” For white women, the authors state, biomythography creates a necessary “*epistemic dichotomy* ...complementary to double consciousness although experienced from the White privileged position” (182). The authors contend that both are necessary to “foster an ethic of liberation” that will ultimately be freeing for all (184). They define biomythography by fusing Susan Henke’s explanation of it in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (1998) with their own understanding of the



genre: as a “deliberate amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant fiction that locates the struggle for moral agency and self-identity in a context of social oppression” (184). Thomas and Gilman assert that biomythography is most effective in uniting Black and White feminist when coupled with emancipatory historiography. The article uses the works of Flannery O’Connor and Alice Walker, specifically “Everything that Rises Must Converge” and “Beyond the Peacock” to show how Black and White women’s experiences connect and overlap. This connection and overlap is said to be indicative of the reality that the liberation of both races of women is inextricably linked. The article focuses on the work that biomythography does, what the genre is able to achieve both in literary and social spaces.

Similarly, Karen Weekes, lauds biomythography for its ability to allow for full expression of othered female identities, in “Othered Writers, Other Forms: Biomythography and Automythography” (2006). Weekes focuses on biomythography in its capacity as “fictionalized memoir writing” (330). She says it allows othered writers to free themselves from Western genre theory’s “establishment of limits, exclusionary lines, and fierce protection of idealized generic (and implicitly sexual and racial) purity” (331). Weekes explains that these limitations led many women writers to experiment with the autobiographical form. By the end of the twentieth century, she notes that not only Lorde, but also Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Naylor and others pushed the boundaries of the genre. She explains that the significance of using the autobiographical format is that women “bring [themselves] to language and also give their lives narrative shape and allows them to explore the complexity of the empowered female identity within their texts” (332). Blending of the autobiographical and mythical forms allows othered authors

to focus on “the potential of the actualized self and invoke a collective voice” (333). According to Weekes, this voice is fully realized through the acts of naming oneself, telling a collective story and constructing a mythos. These three elements allow for the “presentation of the self in all its complexity” (335). Weekes recognizes this act of self-preservation as a longed-for reality among all othered peoples. She uses Lorde’s famous introductory line as a concrete example of the merging of the many parts of the whole that biomythography achieves—“I stand before you now-Black, lesbian, mother, feminist, poet, warrior- each piece of myself is a source of power for me” (335). Weekes concludes by asserting that this is the triumph of biomythography. It does not define the author according to disenfranchisement or marginality, nor does it force them to privilege one aspect of their unique experience over the other but instead allows “these women [to] write into being an autonomous, individuated self” (344). Again, it is the work of biomythography that is at the crux of this article.

Monica Pearl, an author and lecturer of twentieth century American literature, speaks of the same blending of various identities in “Sweet Home: Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and the legacies of American Writing” (2009), Pearl’s assertion is that while Lorde refers to it as a biomythography (a point that she does not dispute) *Zami* can also be categorized as a mixture of a coming-out narrative and a slave narrative. Like Weekes, Pearl concurs that many women have experimented with the autobiographical form. In addition to Lorde, she mentions Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Gwendolyn Brooks. Pearl says this experimentation is necessary because the telling of women’s stories involves mixing genres. She quotes Judy Long, who said in *Telling Women’s Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text* (1999), women’s accounts “make no attempt to streamline

the narrative, to corset the subject, to shear the web of connections. The fullness of women's accounts reproaches the leanness of generic autobiography, and contradicts its claims of universality" (qtd. in Pearl 298). Pearl supports her argument that Lorde is playing with the slave narrative and the coming-out narrative by explaining the elements of each of these kinds of narratives. The coming-out narrative is a narrative of "recognition, naming, severing from the old identity and community and the adoption of a new identity and community" (299)—all qualities that Pearl says, *Zami* exhibits. The slave narrative, according to Pearl, is one of "journeying, freedom" and "language and literacy." She explains that "some critics argue that all contemporary African American literature fulfills this designation" (304). She does concede that Lorde diverges from the slave narrative in style and content in many ways, but she holds that in her story of learning to read at four while in the library with her mother, and in her adoption of a new name as a way of claiming freedom, Lorde's novel can be classified as such. According to Pearl, what causes Lorde to refer to *Zami* as biomythography is her identity as a lesbian. She says "*Zami* comes out of a tradition of African American writing, but because Lorde is also a lesbian her writing cannot fit into the available African American autobiographical form" (309). Citing *The Color Purple* and its use of the epistolary form, Pearl explains, "the representation of black lesbians makes it impossible to rely on more common forms and styles...neither the autobiography or novel will do. Audre Lorde writes a 'biomythography' for that is what form she needs for telling the story of a black lesbian" (309). Pearl then agrees with Weekes that the genre allows for the full expression of women whose identity cannot find full expression in more generalized genres. Pearl asserts that the "longed-for 'home' is the primary 'myth' of the

biomythography” (311). And that when found, home is “not geographical but textual.” She again echoes Weekes in her assertion that Lorde “finds her home in language: first her mother’s language, then her own” (313). Pearl concludes that while the coming-out narrative and the slave narrative are narrative of conversion, “the two have never been embodied before in one narrative...Lorde fuses these two traditions, and in this she is making a home for herself in language.” Pearl’s article is centered on how biomythography creates space for Black lesbians to tell their story—the work of biomythography.

In the piece of contemporary scholarship that is most like my own analysis of the genre, Anh Hua, explores the origins of biomythography in “Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference” (2015). Hua’s argument is that the “resistant narratives of embodied erotic remembrance become an important place for Lorde to narrate self-invention and subjectivity and to rewrite personal and cultural histories” (114). Hua asserts that the fact that “all recollections imply a bodily point of view, is an important argument for diasporic feminists, who theorize memory or write from memory” (115). Citing the novel’s passages on erotic love and sexual awakening as proof, Hua explains that one way that Lorde achieves the revolutionary feat of feeling “at home in her body, flesh, and skin is to rewrite and to reclaim her erotic black lesbian body, placing it at the center of discourse and representation, without essentializing that gendered and racialized body” (117). Hua goes on to say that from the space of erotic embodied memory, Lorde also heals “her own and other women’s traumatic embodied memories” (119). By sharing her stories of childhood sexual assault, Hua states, Lorde breaks the code of silence surrounding sexual assault and makes “intrapsychic and

intrasubjective witnessing” possible. Hua quotes Chinosole’s “Audre Lorde and the Matrilineal Diaspora” in explaining that Lorde traces the genealogy of this diaspora to “links among Black women worldwide enabling them to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as the locus of self-definition and power” (124). From this locus, Lorde via the stories of Carriacou told by her mother, Hua explains, is able to make “the deep connection between her lesbian black body and her woman-identified Caribbean ancestry and genealogy” (123). Lorde also, according to Hua, “remembers and reconstructs the cultural past” through her memoir of her love affair with Kitty/Afrekete, who represents an ancient West African goddess. Lorde revises the mythology surrounding Afrekete when she relays the encounter. Hua concludes that Lorde’s erotic embodied memories create a space from which she fashions a “resistant counternarrative to strategically deal with the disheartening and detrimental conditions often faced by women and girls” (132). While she is clear on what the genre achieves, Hua’s focus is the psychic space in which biomythographies are formed. But while her research reveals that this space is in erotic embodied memories, mine finds it to be in the safe psychic space created by dissemblance.

The safe psychic space created by the culture of dissemblance gives Black women the “room of their own” to imagine, create and write from. This space is inherited from their mothers and grandmothers and is an integral part of diasporic culture. By naming and studying this space and presenting examples of how it is used to create accurate portrayals of Black womanhood, I am clarifying how and why biomythography is able to dismantle the dominant narrative. I am also providing a roadmap for Black women writers to unlock the creative potential of their own safe psychic space. The

misunderstood silence and supposed inaction of the Black woman has been perpetually misinterpreted and denigrated. As Alice Walker relates in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1974), Black women appeared “so deep, so unconscious that they themselves were unaware of the richness they held” (1). Walker explains dissemblance by explaining that Black women had “forced their minds to desert their bodies” (1). Walker says, “[T]hese grandmothers and mothers of ours were not ‘Saints’ but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (2). Their calm quiet was not indicative of acquiescence or acceptance but of biding their time. Walker says they were “moving to music not yet written. And they waited” (2). She asks, “[H]ow was the creativity of the Black woman [writer] kept alive when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime to read or write?” (3).

Walker’s potent question could be phrased even more broadly: How could the Black woman fashion stories about her reality while living in a society built upon her invisibility and treatment as a commodity? When the mirror in which she was forced to view herself is horribly distorted? Lorraine O’Grady, artist and critic, explains the difficult task ahead for Black women writers in “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” (1994): “To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us, this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look” (17). Laura Mulvey, feminist film theorist, explains the damage “unmirroring” causes by quoting Jacques Lacan in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975): “the moment when [one] recognizes its own image in a mirror is crucial for ego development...it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary...and

hence the first articulation of the I” (Mulvey 61). There is a connection between “the realm of representation in mass media and the capacity of black women to construct [themselves] as subjects in daily life,” as bell hooks explains in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women as Spectators” (1992). If the mirror image is the first place that “I” is seen and learned, looking into the mirror and not seeing “I” means there is no “I.” “I” becomes non-existent, unimportant and not to be considered. “I” becomes mute and impotent.

Black women’s use of dissemblance to combat literal and symbolic erasure in literature is reminiscent of a hoodoo ritual I was introduced to while being initiated into the priesthood in 1994. During initiation or in times of mourning, all the mirrors in the house are covered until the soul can find rest and be installed in its rightful place. The sentiment being, whatever one can see in the mirror in the presence of a restless soul, is best left unseen. This rite is what Black women did for themselves by retreating into dissemblance. They covered the mirrors and refused to look at the distortion of themselves. Knowing that the mirrors were bewitched by the racist lens of oppression, they placed their faith in the parts of themselves they could touch with their own hands and know in their own minds. In this way, they held the vision of themselves as whole, complete and fully human. They weave, and crochet, and macramé and quilt the thick cloak of dissemblance around themselves. They wear it as a protective cocoon. Within this cloak their essence is untouched and beyond hurt and damage. So that when a Black woman feels the urge to create narratives about herself or other women like her, she has the option of speaking from inside this protective space. She uses what hooks calls “the ability to manipulate [her] gaze in the face of structures of domination [to] open up the possibility of agency” (308). In this way Black women were able to “both interrogate the

gaze of the Other [and] look back at one another naming what [they] see” (309). When the “I” discovered in the mirror was a thing deemed abhorrent by the dominant society, Black women chose to reject that notion. From their safe psychic space, hooks explains, “Black women spectators created an oppositional gaze.” They “were not duped by mainstream media and they looked from a location that disrupted” (310). From within the space of resistance, they were not weakened but empowered by their ability to critically assess the narrative assigned to them. Empowerment led to the creation of biomythography, a genre born from Black women’s inherent need to speak for and define themselves. The genre is punctuated by its ability to tell stories of the “matrilineal diaspora” spoken of by Hua. Part of the “myth” in biomythography is the collective narrative of anonymous Black women artists who, as Walker states “handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see” (7). These artists who worked in mediums of cloth, or horticulture, or cuisine gifted their children with what Walker calls “the respect for possibilities—and the will to grasp them” (8). As such, biomythography is written in the voice of the Black woman, and through it the unwritten stories of Black mothers and grandmothers are told. This distinction is established in *Zami*, which rests upon the foundation of the stories of Lorde’s mother, aunties and grandmothers. The publication of *Zami*, with its unapologetic portrayal of the Black, the female, the queer, the differently abled, the ostracized and the unlovable as whole and fully human, represents the creation of space in which all Black women could speak freely of themselves and their experience. This new genre grants Black women writers the ability to shatter all previously held mythology surrounding them and craft their own mythology from the perspective of their rich inner lives.



Using *Zami* as my guide, I contend that *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler and *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor should be read as biomythographies. Each of these novels does the work of subverting the dominant narrative by confronting commonly depicted tropes of Black womanhood. In the safe psychic space of dissemblance, Naylor, Butler and Okorafor reconfigure these tropes in a way that allows Black women to be seen and experienced as fully human. Granting humanity to those previously imagined to be commodities should unsettle the mind of the reader, prompting a radical shift with the potential to inspire social change. This is the work for which Lorde created the biomythography the groundwork upon which my analysis stands.

## CHAPTER II: REIMAGINING MAMMY: GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*

“It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies; it’s about a slave woman who gave a whole new meaning to both them words.”

Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

Written in 1988, *Mama Day* is the third novel by novelist, essayist, columnist and educator Gloria Naylor and is in many ways a prequel which explains the origins of some of the characters in an earlier work, *Linden Hills* (1985), as well as her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). *Mama Day* is also prologue for *Bailey’s Café* (1992) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). In an interview with Nicholas Shakespeare in 1989, Naylor says the purpose of *Mama Day* was to analyze the origins of individual beliefs and individual concepts of reality. One of the most highly celebrated works of Naylor, the novel is set in 1999, on the fictitious Sea Island of Willow Springs, off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. It chronicles the love story of Cocoa Ophelia Day and George Andrews. Cocoa is a native of Willow Springs and a descendant of the line of the family that owns the island. George is an orphan from New York, raised in the Wallace P. Andrews home for boys, hence his last name. The central figures of the novel are Miranda Mama Day, Cocoa’s great-aunt and Sapphira Wade’ Cocoa’s great-great grandmother. Sapphira, long dead by the time the story begins, is the penultimate African conjure woman. She acquired Willow Springs by seducing Bascom Wade, the Norwegian man who bought her and subsequently murdered him. Mama Day is the latest conjure woman in the Day line. Cocoa and George’s love affair and marriage are the result of her

conjure. After marrying George, Cocoa brings him home to Willow Springs. After an argument with George, Cocoa is accosted on her back porch by the lecherous Junior Lee. When Junior's wife Ruby comes upon the disheveled Cocoa, he tells her that Cocoa tricked him out onto the porch. Ruby retaliates by working roots on Cocoa through the mechanism of nightshade she puts into the oil she uses to braid Cocoa's hair. Cocoa becomes deathly ill and can only be saved by Mama Day's counter conjure and George's love. In the midst of saving Cocoa, George dies. Cocoa goes on to remarry and begin the work of becoming the next powerful conjure woman from the Day family. Naylor's novel is one of the most concise explorations of the themes of West African spirituality, matriarchal power in the diaspora and sympathetic magic in African American fiction. Despite being published over three decades ago, its in-depth portrayal of African American culture continues to generate critical analysis.

In 2010, Christina Bucher discussed the merits of using the novel to discuss the African American literary trajectory in "He Came but He Don't Believe: Teaching Chestnutt and Conjuring Through the Lens of *Mama Day*." Bucher explains that *Mama Day* is a useful introduction to the African American literary themes of masking, double consciousness, literary stereotypes, signifyin' (cultural and literary), cultural imperialism and African American women's literary history (85). In addition to the literary themes, Bucher notes that the novel also touches on the African American cultural themes of slavery, oppression, continual resistance, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, African American folk traditions, intra-racial prejudice, gender issues and interracial relationships (86). These two factors lead Bucher to use the novel as a "guiding text" in her upper level survey of African American literature course (86). She stresses the important contrasts

between Chestnutt's treatment of conjure in 1887, in short stories like "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po Sandy," and Naylor's treatment of it. Bucher explains that the contrasts are a result of the times in which the authors were writing, the difference in gendered experiences the authors were having and the audience they were targeting. The gendered realities are particularly important because Bucher explains that Naylor uses "conjure as a specific indicator of black women's strength and power in the past and present" (94). So although both authors address conjure as a "serious, respected element of African American culture," only Naylor asks the reader to "consider the possibility of conjure not as a folk belief but as a potential reality" (87). In this she echoes Naylor's own explanation of the novel as one that questions individual concepts of reality.

Naylor's treatment of conjure is in keeping with "African feminist or womanist theorists" and their "direct reference to and recuperation of the conjure tradition" (87). Bucher explains that "the use of myth in black women writers' texts [is] a vehicle for aligning real and imaginative events in both the present and the past and for dissolving the temporal and spatial bridges between them" (87). Bucher concludes by explaining that the novel is extremely useful in introducing students to African American culture and reinforcing the resolve of every reader to continue the fight against oppression (94).

Bucher's analysis of Naylor's use of myth in the novel mirrors the explanation of the "myth" in biomythography as a Black woman's unique way of understanding and validating her personal narrative. Her understanding of the power of narrative to change the mind of the reader and therefore spark positive social change are also reminiscent of what I believe Lorde intended biomythographies to accomplish.

In “Matriarchal and Mythical Healing in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” B. Vijayalakshmi argues that Naylor creates a “hermetic community in the novel with Sapphira Wade as the legendary mother” (2). Like Bucher, Vijayalakshmi exhibits how the “matriarchal myth” of Willow Springs and the sacred practice of conjure empowers the novel’s characters, thus establishing its biomythographical characteristics. She explains that the murder of Bascombe Wade elevates Sapphira to the status of Mother Goddess and displaces the patriarchy with matriarchal power. Vijayalakshmi identifies the central conflict of the novel as George being “unable to acknowledge the powers of matriarchy” (3). She interprets Naylor as intimating that George’s failure represents global disharmony as “the world still reels from the displacement of the Goddess” (3). This lack of connection is what eventually leads to George’s death, as his “consciousness was not bound on faith in the ancestral past” (3). *Mama Day* is able to act as “healer, predictor, conjurer and counselor” of Willow Springs and to maintain “liberation” for the people there through “ancestral gifts and wisdom” bestowed upon her as a descendant of Sapphira Wade (4). Vijayalakshmi concludes by stating that the novel is a depiction of the “collective process of the empowerment” of women in which “Naylor establishes feminine power and dignity amidst institutionalized patriarchy” (4).

Like Bucher and Vijayalakshmi, in “Naylor’s *Mama Day* and the Force of Spirit” (2014), Jane Duran agrees that *Mama Day*’s greatest strengths lie in its ability to show the African mythological foundation of African American culture and to exhibit how this mythology guides and empowers the characters. Duran explains that Naylor’s work is generally discussed with regard to the “bonds of sisterhood” (1). She sees this as an egregious oversight as Naylor “has a gift for bringing the parts of African heritage that

are all too often unacknowledged to light” (1) Duran points out that the novel is written from a distinctly African perspective as Naylor “sets the African tone for the atmosphere with the first lines” when she traces the lineage of Mama Day back to Sapphira Wade—reminiscent of how *Zami* begins with Lorde retelling her mother’s stories of their Caribbean lineage. In this, Duran says that Naylor evokes the “story-telling structure of West African cultures” (3). By doing so, “Naylor’s writing allows us to think along African lines” (2). As such the novel plunges readers into a “worldview that is reliant upon the spiritual and might be deemed to see the spiritual in all things,” as this is an “apt way of labeling the West African metaphysics that is the hallmark of New World Diasporic cultures” (2). Cocoa’s violent illness, brought on by Ruby’s evil root-working, is an example of how a belief in West African spirituality is implied throughout the narrative. Duran argues that “Naylor’s special talent is in the precise gift of making believable that which is unbelievable, as one of the characters in the story says. Clearer than Bambara, more contemporary than Chesnutt, and more deeply rooted in the culture than such writers as McMillan and Briscoe, Naylor accomplishes an important goal” (5). Duran explains that Naylor clearly intends for the African historical past of the characters to have a bearing on how they are rendered as well as what they experience and how they respond to their experiences. Citing the scene when Ruby braids Cocoa’s hair, Duran notes that “in using metaphors that are of African origin to forward a novel about life in the contemporary United States, Naylor [does not] simply want to show Everywoman in Black guise” (7). Like Lorde, Naylor not only acknowledges but centers the novel on the unique lived experience of Black women. Cocoa’s ability to cling to life is based upon her acceptance of the fact that even though she thought she had “moved beyond it,” her

unique African based “culture was a part of her very being” (5). Clinging to her heritage, based in the mythology of her foremothers, is Cocoa’s salvation. Comparing Naylor to Caribbean writers, Duran praises her for “not only harkening to the past, but attempting to make it a part of everyday life” (7), thus, underscoring the importance of myth in the Black female worldview. In conclusion, Duran says that “Naylor’s work can indeed be instructive for us all, and the conjure that is accomplished in the novel, as was the case for some of the nineteenth-century writing dealing with the same themes, is conjure that affects the reader and his or her mindset.” Duran’s conclusion punctuates my own belief: writing that disrupts the commonly held notions of the reader to effect social change is one of the primary distinctions of biomythography.

The analyses of Bucher, Vijayalaksmi and Duran expound upon the essential place West African mythology holds in the African American worldview, the connection to the power of the ancestral matriarchy, and culture as an integral part of existence. These elements link *Mama Day* to Lorde’s storytelling style in *Zami* and are in many ways essential to categorizing the novel as a biomythography. However, I submit that the most compelling biomythographical element of this tale is Naylor giving voice and agency to the characterization of Mammy through Sapphira Wade, Mama Day and Abigail Day. The most powerful feat the novel achieves is the unveiling of the previously invisible and the granting of speech to one who has been muted for centuries.

The connotations surrounding the word Mammy are the result of centuries of commodification of the Black female body. Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, in *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (2008), explains that the term Mammy,

in reference to a Black female caretaker of white children, made its literary debut in 1810 in a travel narrative about the American South. According to Sanders, etymological evidence suggests that it was originally used as a common southern term for mother. After 1892, it became exclusively linked to Black female bodies used as wet nurses and caretakers (4). The physical characteristics that establish Mammy as carnivalesque were not codified until after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Mammy was created to "lend authenticity to the antebellum plantation household." She was described by historian Deborah Gray as "the perfect slave for the antebellum south" (Sanders 7). She first appeared in pro-slavery texts to curtail abolitionist sentiments. The earliest literature containing fictional characters displaying Mammy's characteristics are *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824), *Scenes in Georgia* (1827) and *Linda, or the Young Pilot of the Belle Creole* (1852). The Mammies in these texts range from a "yellow complexion with delicate and raised features" to one whose "African blood has not been corrupted by the base mingling of a paler stream" (Sanders 21). None of the Mammies are overweight; they are described as being small in stature and spry in step. The standardizing feature among all three characters is what has been referred to as Mammy's "peculiar African capacity for devotion" (Sanders 5). Peculiar in that, as Isabel Drysdale explains in *Scenes*, "It seems to exceed the force of her natural affection for her own offspring...She considers her master's child as a superior being and receives with overflowing gratitude the fond endearments of infantile affection" (Sanders 18). Similarly, Caroline Hentz writes in *Linda*, Aunt Judy "loved her gentle mistress, nay more than loved, adored and revered her as a being of a superior holier race than her own" (Sanders 19). In the collective imagination, Mammy not only understood her place in the hierarchy, she also



embraced it. Her submission represents not only the correctness of global masculinist imperialism but its victory over its greatest adversary. Mammy was the sole producer of the “Others” upon which the slavocracy firmly rested. The wealth of the nation was based upon the enslavement of her children. Yet, instead of angry, rebellious and anxious for freedom, Mammy is constructed as a woman so mute, so docile, and so powerless that she can be entrusted with cooking for her captors and caring for their infants.

Sanders details how the hallmarks of the characterization were cemented at the beginning of the Civil War. It is based upon long-held imagery of Black female bodies as deviant. At this time Mammy began to be portrayed as very big and very dark. Her features became distinctly sub-Saharan African. Her physical characteristics were revised to represent all that was wild and savage in the collective imagination. Sanders explains that one of the first examples of this portrayal was on a postcard circulated by the Cotton States Aristocracy. It features a very dark Black woman breastfeeding an enormous white baby. The postcard reads: “An Institution of the Cotton States Aristocracy. Though now unconscious on MaMa’s breast, Glorious Destiny awaits the high-born babe; A Knight, A Baron, a Duke. A Royal crest, May yet upon his diadem wave” (Sanders 52). The message of the postcard is clear. The once poor and ostracized European immigrants had built their coffers in the American South. Their status was now the same as the landed gentry that had shunned them in their homelands. This wealth was built both with and within Black female bodies; access to this commodity would not be acquiesced easily. Immortalized in this postcard, Mammy iconography represents the complete domestication of the beast of what Morrison referred to as the “dark, signing Africanist

presence.” It decries the ability of the Cotton States Aristocracy to hold wild Black femaleness at bay while simultaneously putting it to good and proper use.

From this sentiment grew the Mammy trope that is the prevailing depiction of Black womanhood across all forms of media. Post slavery, she morphed into the sister, mother, lover or friend who was an endless fount of emotional, physical and sexual labor. The audience rarely knows her back story; her character is built upon the stories of others and she usually does not have a voice. Her thoughts, her dreams, her own unique desires are unimportant and therefore unexplored. We see her peering at us through some of the most poignant portrayals of Black life. She is Bessie in *Native Son* (1940). She is Ruth Dead in *Song of Solomon* (1977). She is Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). We know Mammy by that same “peculiar capacity for devotion” that Sanders identified. Her character has a curious commitment to people and causes that do not serve her best interests in any way. She rarely defends herself or acts in her own self-interest. She is self-sacrificing to a fault and often self-deprecating. She rarely has a romantic interest but may have children. In Black literature, she serves as the whipping boy, counselor and enabler. In white literature, she provides the milieu. While it is no longer considered politically correct for her constantly be portrayed as very big and very black, she remains big, black, silent, wild femaleness upon which the collective imagination can freely suckle. In “The Oppositional Gaze” bell hooks describes her characterization as the “... context that constructs her presence as absence, that denies the ‘body’ of the black female” (310). Her character requires no development. Her background is unimportant. The audience sees her but never fully perceives her. To perceive her fully would be to grant her humanity and being. hooks explains that “even

when ...black women [characters] were present ...[their] bodies and being were there to serve white [interests]." hooks defines this portrayal as racism's "violent erasure of black womanhood" (310).

Mammy remains the dark shadowy milieu upon which artistic ideas play. It is difficult to imagine that Mammy has feelings, has autonomous thoughts, and exists and has a life outside of servitude. However, Naylor convinces us that Mammy too receded into her psychic space, and in *Mama Day* Mammy speaks from this safe space. Naylor radically reimagines Mammy as fully human, complete with voice and agency. Naylor immersed this narrative as well as *Linden Hills* and *Bailey's Café*, in the spirit of the enslaved African conjure woman Sapphira Wade. She confessed, in an interview conducted by Charles Rowell in 1997, that "always in my head Sapphira Wade would be the cornerstone because she has been the guiding spirit." Few books dissect and examine the Mammy trope as thoroughly as *Mama Day*. The central characters Sapphira Wade, Abigail Day and Miranda Day each represent a different facet of the reimagined Mammy. Sapphira is the enslaved African woman impregnated by her owner. Miranda is the village midwife, healer and community caregiver. Abigail is the often obscured, fully domesticated, indulgent Black mother. All three and indeed every Black female character in the story is a conjure woman – a woman of African descent with shamanic powers. The setting is located completely outside of a white reality and therefore offers a consummate impression of unencumbered Black thoughts, attitudes and actions. Each main character presents a facet of Mammyhood that has historically been portrayed as the purview of Mammy's owners or employers. However, Naylor reconfigures the tropes by making each Black woman the center and focus of her own emotional, physical and

spiritual labors. In doing so, she introduces the audience to the possibility of imaginings and eventually realities in which all are experienced as levelly human.

Sapphira Wade: “Satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending on which of us takes a mind to her.” She could “walk through a lightening storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightening in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightening to start the kindling under her medicine pot” (3). An “ancient mother of pure Black...the Black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun.” The ancient mother that “one day spits out [descendants of] gold” (48). She gifted her posterity with “an island that got spit out from the mouth of God” (110). That “fell to the earth and brought an army of stars” (110). When God reached down to scoop the stars back up “he found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth.” Sapphira implored, “leave ‘em here lord. I ain’t got nothing but these poor Black hands to guide my people. But I can lead on with light” (Naylor 110).

Before the story begins, the collective imagination attempts to commodify the wild Black female body of Sapphira. The book’s preface is her bill of sale, dated 1819. But even then, the possibility of reducing her to chattel was tenuous. She is described as “half prime, inflicted with sullenness and entertaining a bilious nature, having resisted under reasonable chastisement the performance of field or domestic labour.” Even so, the bill admits that Sapphira “had served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft” (1). Warnings notwithstanding, Bascombe Wade acquires Sapphira. The variations on the details of their alliance are numerous. She “smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to

tell the story for a thousand days.” She “married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose laughing in a burst of flame.” She “persuaded Bascombe Wade to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by person or persons unknown.” The narrator specifies that the only verifiable parts of the legend are “the death of Bascombe Wade, the deeds to our land, and the seven sons.” Her children were “born in slavery time but they lived as free because their mama willed it so...black folks, white folks, and even red folks only dare to whisper the name Sapphira” (4).

Sapphira, and in a sense her union with Bascombe, is celebrated every December 22 on the island of Willow Springs. In the year 1999, in which the book is set, “folks take to the road, holding some kind of light,” gift each other something from the earth and share the whispered parting greeting—“lead on with light.” But Mama Day, who is in her 80’s when the story occurs, remembers that when she was young the residents would “meet on the main road, hum some lost and ancient song and walk with their candles to the bluff over the ocean...raise them candles facing East and say ‘Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light.’” Mama Day also recounts that her father said “people kinda worshipped his grandmother, a slave woman who took her freedom in 1823.” He said, “she left behind seven sons and a dead master as she walked down the main road, candle held high to light her way to the east bluff over the ocean.” In his time, they would, “line the main road with candles, food and slivers of ginger to help her spirit along.” Mama Day has an encounter with the spirits of Bascombe and Sapphira that

proves that, in fact, “the light wasn’t for her, it was for him” as he searched for the absconded Sapphira eventually dying “from a broken heart” (112).

Within the narrative, Sapphira is nexus, matrix and genesis. She is the matter from which Willow Springs and all its inhabitants were formed. The narrator explains that she is what “everyone knows but nobody talks about” because “Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words.” By engaging the narrative, the reader is assured that “you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade” and “you done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car—you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word” (4). The house she lived and bore her sons in is referred to as the other place in the narrative. Her spirit lingers there and imbues it with magical power. Sapphira’s name connotes all that is wild and unruly in Black womanhood. Sapphire is an epithet used in African American vernacular to describe the volatile aspects of Black womanhood. Sapphire is generally seen as a derisive term. In *Venus in the Dark*, Hobson refers to it as a “simplistic stereotype” (16). In *Mammy*, Sanders describes it as a “derogatory icon” (32). It was even mentioned in the Black feminist Cohambee River Collective Statement in 1977 as a “pejorative stereotype.” Though the use of the term may predate the television show, the best-known personification of Sapphire iconography is taken from the character who bore that name in the “Amos and Andy” show (1928). bell hooks discusses Sapphire at length in “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992). Naylor’s characterization rejects the notion of Sapphire that hooks describes as “this hated black female thing – foil, backdrop [whose] black female image was not the body of desire” (9). Instead, Sapphira Wade embodies those grown

Black ladies hooks spoke of, who claimed “Sapphire as their own, as the symbol of that angry part of themselves white folks and Black men could not even begin to understand” (15). Sapphira is the fully unbridled, feral Black feminine. She speaks to the elements, commands the senses and given the opportunity, she did not break a heart; “she tore one wide open” (Naylor 120).

Willow Springs is the physical manifestation of the safe psychic space Sapphira Wade retreated into to protect herself from slavery. It “ain’t in no state” so no place in the United States can claim it. It is “forty-nine square miles curving like a bow, stretching toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north.” And “right smack in the middle where each foot of our bridge sits is the dividing line between them two states.” Its positioning protected Sapphira’s descendants because the island “belonged to us-clean and simple. And it belonged to our daddies and our daddies before them, and them too-who at one time all belonged to Bascombe Wade.” There were no European members of Wade family to claim the land as he was “Norway-born and the land had been sitting in his family since it got explored and claimed by the Vikings.” The residents of Willow Springs did not have to pay taxes and could not be governed by any laws of America as “Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway...and we wasn’t even Americans when we got [the land]—was slaves” (5).

Willow Spring was lush, fertile and beautiful like the rich inner lives of Black women. It was “another world where even the word paradise failed” as a descriptor. It contained “a sleepy little section of wooden storefronts, sporadic houses of stucco, brick and clapboard all framed by palmettos, live oaks and flowering bushes.” There were also

“spans of marshland and patches of woods.” Upon it, “the air thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float on it.” When you arrive, there is no choice “but to breathe in lungfuls of oaks dripping with silvery gray moss, high leaning pines and muddy flatlands.” It “smelled like forever.” And “by some crazy clause in [the] deeds, it’s always owned two generations down. That’s to keep any Day from selling it” (175). Willow Springs was the place Sapphira created that would forever shield her children from the ravages of slavery and the violence of Jim Crow. It is no accident that it is situated among the Sea Islands of Georgia, renown for their tenacious retention of west and central African culture. Willow Springs, created by the Black female body and mind, is the place where a Black person can fully BE.

The fierce, protective instincts of Sapphira as an African mother are the binding material of the other place. Held together by the sheer force of will of this African woman, the other place reeks of magic, conjure and the supernatural. Abigail and Miranda were the last Days to officially live there. But they, Abigail’s children and all of their Willow Springs forebears, save Sapphira and Bascombe, had been born there. It is the fount of the Day’s magic. It bears no stately plantation name, because in a Black reality, plantations are not stately. It stands as a testament to the vicious system that enslaved Sapphira and her ability to bring it to its knees. It does not fully exist in this world or the next. Hence, it is simply called the other place.

The imagining of Sapphira Wade allows the audience to finally know Mammy’s true thoughts and feelings. Sapphira Wade is the Black female body—bought, sold and bred. However, from inside her safe psychic space she reveals that she never experienced



herself as commodity. She never agreed with nor acquiesced to the system that imagined her and her progeny chattel. And while this depiction of her is fictitious, history is replete with tales of real life Sapphiras. In the light of Sapphira Wade, we can see the force behind women like Tituba, whose magic was so powerful that she became the first woman to be accused of witchcraft in Salem; Araminta Harriet Tubman, whose courage and ferocity led her back and forth between enemy lines thousands of times; and Marie Therese Coincoin, who married her enslaver, bore his children and was gifted his plantation. When placed against the backdrop of history, we are struck with the truth that Sapphira is fact, and her characterization as Mammy is fiction.

The character from whom Naylor's novel takes its name is Sapphira Wade's great granddaughter, Mama Day. As such, she and her sister Abigail are the natural heirs of all of Willow Springs. She is, like her great grandmother before her, a force to be reckoned with. The narrator explains "ain't nobody gone trifle with [what is] Mama Day's, 'cause she knows how to use it—her being a direct descendent of Sapphire Wade, piled on the fact of springing from the seventh son of the seventh son." Her longevity and the skill of her conjuring is established in the first six pages. Crossing her would find the transgressor "scratching at fleas you don't have or rolling in the marsh like a mud turtle." Those who assumed her weak due to age and were "waiting for her to die...She says she ain't gonna...[she] showed up in one century, made it all the way through the next and had a toe touching over into the one approaching." Mama Day's life span "was about as close to eternity as anybody can come" (6).

Mama Day is an adroit watcher and interpreter of signs and symbols and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the flora and fauna of Willow Springs. John-Paul Day, her daddy, had taught her “these woods been here before you and me...learn to move around them.” As a child “the whole island was her playground; she’d walk through without snapping a twig, disappear into the shadow of a cottonwood and flatten herself close to the ground under a moss-covered rock shelf.” The people of Willow Springs “started believing John-Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods.” Her childhood was lost when her mother’s mental health collapsed after the accidental death of her youngest daughter, Peace. Named Miranda at birth, she reminisces that she had “no time to be young” after that and became “Little Mama.” Her father told her “I can’t hold this house together by myself...we need you Little Mama.” She sacrificed her youth, her desire for a lover and her life first to her family, then to all of Willow Springs. She recounts “Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own.” Even her sister Abigail called her “Little Mama until she knew what it was to be one in her own right.” Mama Day counts Abigail’s, and indeed every child she has helped mothers to bear, as her own: “Abigail’s had three and I’ve had-Lord can’t count ‘em-into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now” (95).

The paradox of the characterization of Mama Day is this suggestion of regret for not having married or bore children of her own. This seems to cast her, not as Mammy for people outside of her world, but as a “mule” for her immediate and extended family in Willow Springs. The paradox is rectified by fact that her work could not possibly be taken advantage of as she inspires ardent respect and extreme fear among the residents of Willow Springs. All that Mama Day does and gives is by her own accord: “And what she

gave of her own will, she took away.” As she herself said, “before I’d let you mess with me or mine, I’d wrap you up in tissue paper and send you straight to hell” (12).

Throughout the novel Naylor showcases Mama Day’s power and strength as a conjure woman. She lands a job and a husband for her niece Cocoa by convincing her to send a letter of inquiry to the last person who interviewed her, George Andrews. She says “when you’re done-make sure you let me send it.” After reading the letter, George notices “a film of yellow powder on [his] hands” (28). Shortly thereafter, he recommends Cocoa for a position at a neighboring firm and they begin dating and eventually marry. She examines Cocoa’s best friend Bernice, and discovers she has ovarian cysts and puts her on a regimen of hard work, herbs and rest to cure them. Once they are cured, she uses the egg of a hen to help impregnate her. The only explanation given being, “pulsing and alive-wet-the egg move from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight” (45). Finally, she kills Ruby, a subordinate conjure woman who tries to kill Cocoa by working roots on her. She takes her father’s hickory cane to Ruby’s house and “slams it into the left side of the house...silvery powder is thrown into the woods.” Then “she strikes it on the back. Powder...and strikes it against the front door.” By the end of that night, “lightening is flashing in the clouds...hits the bridge...hits Ruby’s twice, and the second time the house explodes” (82). Her “sharp tongue and fiery temper” are equal to her quick wit and ribald humor (31). Mama Day is the radical reimagining of the facet of the Mammy trope that is a healer and herbal physician. Armed with the genes of Sapphira Wade, she carries the fire and magic of her great grandmother into modern times. Real Mama Days are a mainstay in Black southern culture and are called Granny Midwives. Many volumes have been written on them and how their

extensive herbal knowledge and curative powers kept southern Black communities healthy and fruitful. Real Mama Days also existed as well-known conjure women, such as Marie Laveau of New Orleans and Nanny of the Maroons, in Jamaica. Their skill in conjure made them national icons. The transgressive reconstruction of the trope we witness in Naylor's novel reveals that the docile, self-deprecating Mammy is fiction and Mama Day is fact.

Naylor gives representation to the tender, nurturing aspects of Black motherhood in regards to Black children in *Abigail Day*. Sapphira's youngest great granddaughter Abigail is familiar with herbs and magic but focuses her energy on cooking nourishing meals and child-rearing. She is the mother of Hope who gave birth to Willa Prescott who appears in *Linden Hills*. Abigail is beautiful, delicate and tender: "Her full head of silvery hair is pinned up with mother of pearl combs whose rosey tints match the fine pink lines in her new sundress." The narrator assures us, "she is still a beautiful woman, and able to turn a few heads yet in front of the barbershop when she is done up right." Abigail is refined and genteel. She is in charge of writing letters to Cocoa because "she owns the box of good writing paper and her script is the prettiest." She explains that "you don't send a letter to a place as important as New York on some no-class, ruled paper" (52). She has sweet dismissal for every one of Mama Day's bawdy jokes, and when she is asked to go to the other place with Mama Day, she responds "it's too much sister" (110). When Cocoa is stricken with the illness Ruby inflicted her with, it is Abigail that "went about boiling boneset tea and straining fresh chicken broth." It was Abigail who covered all the mirrors in the house when Cocoa began hallucinating. And when Cocoa explains how the "welts left the surface of my skin and began to crawl within my body, feeding on

me,” it was Abigail who “gathered me in her arms and began to stroke...when her hand passed over a place where they were burrowing, they would remain still.” She whispers sweetly to Cocoa, “don’t worry, I won’t sleep” (115).

Abigail is the honey to Mama Day’s vinegar. She is the sweet, indulgent mothering instincts of the Black woman. We see in Abigail the enslaved Black woman Adeline, whose story was recounted by Daina Berry in *The Price for Her Pound of Flesh* (2017), who “looked fondly into her sweet child’s face and pressed it warmly to her bosom” while on the auction block (15). We see her in Harriet Jacobs who, in her slave narrative wrote, “I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom” (154). We even see her in Margaret Garner, the real-life inspiration Morrison’s *Beloved*, who would rather kill her infant daughter than have her live life as a slave. The reimagining reveals the truth that what Morrison called the “natally dead” Black female body is the fiction, while Abigail is the fact (22).

Speaking from her safe psychic space in *Zami*, Lorde humanizes the Black lesbian by allowing readers entry into her thoughts and experiences. Naylor does the same for Mammy in *Mama Day*. Weekes and Pearl both explain that “bio” in biomythography is the lives that Lorde is narrating—her own, her mothers, her lovers and her ancestors. Similarly, Naylor narrates the lives of Black women bought and sold during the founding of America. Hua and Pearl express the importance of the ancestral past in *Zami* and how it lays the foundation for Lorde’s narrative while also providing validation by citing the ways in which she is walking in the footsteps of her foremothers. *Mama Day* also rests

upon the traditions and mythology surrounding African foremothers and centers its storyline on their lives and practices. Finally, by humanizing and giving voice to marginalized members of society, both novels achieve the biomythographical goal of jarring, upsetting, and therefore challenging the dominant narrative that replays in the collective imagination. This allows the reader the opportunity to reexamine previously accepted paradigms and beliefs. This reexamination is the beginning of social change.

### CHAPTER III: REIMAGINING THE BREEDER: OCTAVIA BUTLER'S

#### *DAWN*

"You'll begin again. You will become something other than what you were."

Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*

Published in 1987, *Dawn* is the first novel in Octavia Butler's dystopian trilogy originally titled *Xenogenesis*. The three novels were published in a one volume version called *Lilith's Brood* in 2000. While the parallels to slavery are varied and obvious, in an interview by Stephen W. Potts in 1996 Butler insists that "The only places I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so" (1). Instead, Butler explained that she wanted to reexamine the alien invasion trope in the trilogy. She says she wanted to portray "something different with the invasion story. So often you read novels about humans colonizing other planets and either the aliens resist and we have to conquer them violently, or they submit and become good servants. I don't like either of those alternatives, and I wanted to create a new one. I mean, science fiction is supposed to be about exploring new ideas and possibilities" (2).

In *Dawn*, Butler explores the possibility of an alien race that is at once horrified by and powerfully sexually attracted to the human race. The Oankali have a biological need to cross-breed with other species for survival. They meet humankind after humans have succeeding in destroying the Earth and most of humanity via nuclear war. The Oankali seize this opportunity and gather all remaining humans and through means of their unique biology introduce organic compounds into the Earth that allow it to repair

itself. This seemingly altruistic act is sullied by the reality that quite literally, whatever the Oankali touch becomes helplessly bonded to them. Once they have “helped” the Earth and humans to survive, both entities morph into Oankali constructs of what they were before. The catalyst for their breeding with humanity is a 28-year-old Black woman, Lilith Ayapo. The story is set 250 years after the apocalypse aboard an alien organism that the Oankali “grew” to transport them around the galaxy—a living, breathing, nurturing “ship.” Lilith has been held in suspended animation for the better part of two and a half centuries and the novel is based upon the Oankali awakening her and tasking her with the seemingly impossible duty of awakening 40 other humans to begin the act of what the Oankali call “trade.” The trade involves learning how to live on the modified Earth without machinery or any remnants of the human past and mating with Oankali and creating a new species. Lilith is told that “egg and sperm will no longer unite” without Oankali biological assistance (29). Additionally, the Oankali are hideous human-size gray sluglike creatures, abhorrent to view but sexually irresistible once they have touched you. The novel chronicles Lilith’s navigation of these impossible circumstances and the choice she makes to resist this invasion of her body and her world. With themes spanning the horrific, the ecological and the sexual, *Dawn* has garnered considerable critical attention.

In 2009, in “Arboreal Dialogics: An Ecocritical Exploration of Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*”, (Andrew Plisner addresses what he believes is a gap in ecocritical analysis of Afrofuturistic works. He explains that “one of the most deft manifestations of ecocritical development occurs within Octavia Butler’s science/speculative fictive literature” (145). He says that in Butler’s texts, “environmental analyses navigate social, cultural and geographical terrain by challenging boundaries and expanding constrictive spaces.” This



challenging and expanding is indicative of biomythographical writing. Plisner notes that Butler's exploration of this theme in *Dawn* is presented as an example of how the "colonial mentality demands the deserting the occult" (148). The occult here being the previously existing philosophies of the cultures being invaded. Plisner points out that "colonialists preemptively attacked threats that occult societies posed" (148). Plisner's observation speaks to the policy of the colonial versus the matriarchal mythological that is one of the implications of *Zami* and by extension the novels I am categorizing as biomythological. According to Plisner, the Oankali insistence on destroying all human relics is their attempt to obliterate human mythology. Plisner likens this destruction to "Africa's colonization" by explaining that it was "predicated upon the notion that its societies' relationships to their environments [via the mythos surrounding them] held the Western colonists' exploitative intentions captive" (147). Butler examines Oankali's insistence upon a deviation from all human mythos that preceded their capture and the human urge to retain it in what Plisner hails as an exploration of "the definition of self-identity and ownership of self" (148). *Dawn* undertakes this exploration in the "polymorphous transformations undergone by multiple characters." These characters include "the Earth, the skeletal structure of the Earth and humankind" (149). Plisner agrees with my analysis here that "Lilith's apprehension [towards these forced transformations] as a black woman in an alien environment emphasizes the historical rootedness of the subjugation of individuals by totalitarian regimes and their institutions" (150). While focusing on the definition of self, Plisner explains that at the same time, Butler "ecocritically challenges the notions of individualism and the notions of

significance in organic societies” and also “critically engages the reader in an African American conceptualization of these notions.”

Plisner’s argument focuses, in part, on genre. He believes that one of the greatest strengths of the novels is how “Butler defies pre-existing canons regarding SF conventions.” He explains that one of the most defiant themes of the novel is the “Oankali philosophical foundation [which] specifically refutes the contemptuous attitude held by human’s industrial, and thus destructive attitude towards their environment.” Via this philosophy and its implications, Plisner says that instead of creating a robotic future, Butler creates “a post-modern society that is organically conceptualized” and in doing so inverts “the old bionic synthesis of old-world modernism and new world technology.” This is an example of what I refer to as the conjure inherent in biomythography that Plisner calls “alchemy.” He argues that Butler adapts “the spatial context in which her text develops and alchemically transmutes her text’s significance” thereby transmuting the “spatiality of the genre” that “may have been considered restrictive” and “actively stimulates the constriction of the field” (154). Plisner likens this transmutation to the Oankali by declaring that “one could argue that she is genetically modifying her readership so that her actions are less proleptic and more organic or pre-modern” (150). In this, her use of the biblical Lilith in the name of her protagonist is what Plisner calls “an invocation of blackness as the ‘dark mother’ in the Western canon” which “reinforces her biological attributes and further encourages the retention of cultural memories” (155). Plisner implies that only the ‘dark mother’ could genetically modify readership as the author while simultaneously genetically modifying humanity as the protagonist being written about: “Lilith’s gender and her status as an anthropologist qualify her as an

external matriarch” (154) . Only an external matriarch could “be responsible for her peer’s return [to Earth].” Plisner concludes by hailing the novel as one in which “Butler expands, constructs and rotates spatial arenas in which the black female voice and body previously existed.” And by doing so, Butler “enables such identities to autonomously develop, to roam unfettered, and explore new occult territories previously inaccessible to such identities” (156). This is how biomythographies do the work of freeing wild Black femaleness.

Gregory Hampton discusses this same liberation in terms of “rethinking the memories of marginalized bodies” in his 2012 essay “Lost Memories: Memory as a Process of Identity in the Fiction of Octavia Butler.” Hampton presents several fascinating studies that explain how memory is retained in the body as well as the fact that as a defense mechanism, the human mind forgets details of traumatic events. This forgetting is scientifically referred to as retrieval induced forgetting. Hampton explains that in light of these realities, “historians cannot be the sole keepers and engineers of the past, for such a task is clearly an art form and not a science” (266). Butler exhibits the art form of constructing history (or myth) via memory by gifting Lilith with “perfect recall ... this removes the distance between the past and the present to the point of making the distinction between yesterday and today become insignificant” (262). This distancing is what Duran praised Naylor for in *Mama Day* and also what Lorde achieves in *Zami* by making the stories of her foremothers the foundation of the novel.

What Hampton calls “perfect recall” creates the space of dissemblance from which Lilith is able to insure survival. Hampton notes that it “locates her in a constant

state of the ‘present’” and allows her to “define herself and her humanity via her ability to survive and her memory of humanity’s past” (262). The act of dissemblance as displayed through Lilith is an example of how “Butler’s fiction focuses on “the process of constructing history and imagining the past as a means to exist in the present.”

Harkening back to the “myth” in biomythography, Hampton contends that “reproducing the past is a creative process that requires the skills of an imaginative artist.” Like Plisner, Hampton refers to the ecological past, the place where the character once was, as important in Butler’s portrayal of the myth or memory: “in Butler’s fiction memory is often synonymous with relocating a body or consciousness in a space and time may have existed prior to the present.” Hampton explains that this relocation represents the “employment of time and memory as tools to construct history” (266). Constructing history in this way is essential because “memory is a process that is necessary to give the body meaning and value in the present.” Lilith, Hampton says, “employs memory as a tool to define herself and her future” (267). Like Sapphira Wade and Lorde’s foremothers, Lilith represents the matriarchal myth itself. Hampton observes that “when memory is lost or displaced, the body loses its meaning, and the conscious performances of identity are also lost.” This loss is evident in the effects enslavement had on the identities of both the perpetrators and victims of the trauma, hence “Lilith’s memory of Earth before its destruction is less important than her ability to learn new ways of survival from the Oankali” (270).

In the wake of this trauma Lilith and the Oankali must construct new identities for themselves. Lilith is a reimagining of enslaved African women forced to breed. Hampton points out that she “represents survivors who have navigated the past in order to move

forward into the present.” Further, he suggests, “it is often important to forget the details of an event in order for the body to learn and embrace difference necessary to move forward” (275). This speaks to the necessity of biomythography to reshape pre-existing mythology as Lorde does with Afrekete in *Zami* and as Butler does with Lilith in *Dawn*. Tradition cannot move forward if it is stagnant. Hampton concludes with an explanation of the work that biomythography performs : he says, “Butler’s fiction demonstrates how despite great efforts to redefine marginalized bodies according to then wishes of the dominant hegemony, those bodies retain memories of their own identities.” By situating the Black female body in the spaces and terrains created in *Dawn*, Butler “does not remove the body from marginalization but does begin a process that can facilitate self-identification and actualization” (277).

Justin Louis Mann also focuses on genre in his 2018 essay “Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*.” The genre he proposes is pessimistic futurism, “a unique way of thinking and writing black female sexuality” that “couches the prospects of tomorrow in the uncertainties conditioned by the past and present.” From this perspective, Lilith cast as “humanity’s universal ancestor, recasts human survival and evolution rather than conservation and maintenance.” Echoing earlier analyzes of Lilith as messianic matriarch, Mann says, “*Dawn* re-framed Reagan-era debates about security and survival by describing humanity as hell-bent on self-annihilation and then marking Lilith as an agent to combat the suicidal tendencies” (62). Mann contends, as do I, that in this characterization, “Lilith metaphorically repudiates and reframes the vulgar constructions of black maternity circulating in American discourse.” As with African women forced to breed during enslavement, “*Dawn* ties

humanity's survival to Lilith's reproductive and maternal capacity." In this capacity, like the Breeders, "Lilith consistently chooses survival over self-abnegation, retreat or forfeit" (63). In this way, Mann's insightful analysis supports and informs my own: "Lilith's mediated position is instructive; it demonstrates the capacity of speculative thinking to reimagine social realities, offering insight on how the world might be made differently." *Dawn* does what I call the work of biomythography. Mann uses the term pessimistic futurism, because it "reveals an orientation to the future that synthesizes the events of the past to propose an alternative horizon." He asserts that "afro-pessimism understands blackness as an impossibility, an 'aporetic subjectivity' dominated by its proximity to imminent death" (64). Pessimistic futurism, he says, "mobilizes the historic markers of blackness to unsettle and destabilize the arrangements of power and to think beyond those arrangements to remake the future" (66). As such, Mann contends that as an example of pessimistic futurism, "the novel presents life as an active and ongoing struggle rather than a passive state of being ... from the outset, *Dawn* repudiates notions that link blackness to a state of unlife" (67). In other words, the novel repudiates Black women as unbeings. Significantly, Mann draws the parallel between Lorde and Butler, quoting Lorde herself, "*Dawn* insists upon a paradox of survival akin to Audre Lorde's characterization: 'when [black women] survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness and which hate our very existence outside of its service'". He iterates, "For both Lorde and Lilith, black women's survival is a remarkable and unlikely occurrence in a world that tirelessly seeks their abnegation" (68). He concludes by stating that, "from the perspective of pessimistic futurism *Dawn* is a model of critical engagement. The novel is intensely focused on black sexuality and its world-shattering

potential ... it refutes the fantastic resolution of other speculative worlds and captures the essence of pessimistic futurism [in that it] promises little but considers much” (73).

The common theme of the messianic matriarch runs through these analytical considerations of *Dawn* as a symbol of an ecocritical narrative, a treatise on the elements of memory and as an example of pessimistic futurism. My reading of Butler’s novel also foregrounds Lilith’s position as the savior of humanity; her position is crucial to the novel’s role as a subversive text. I also agree that Butler’s very deliberate use of the commonly muted Black female voice is essential to the novel’s work of reconstructing the dystopia trope and the alien invasion trope. However, my emphasis is on the work that Butler does, through Lilith, of reimagining the Breeder trope.

The work of Janell Hobson and Dorothy Roberts provides context for a discussion of the breeder trope. In *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2005), Hobson notes that “a gendered analysis of conquest necessitates that we constantly view the colonial narrative as one exerting sexual power and dominance” (27). In the European male imagination, the Black female body was a symbol of the connection between “land, femaleness, animals and blackness.” She was “nature” and she was “savage” (38). As the most valuable commodity, Black female bodies were the focal point of this narrative. Her body like the land of the New World invited and required conquering and cultivation. Her body was sexualized and exoticized. Her image imbued with the “double bind of lure and loathing, in the Fanonian sense, for the foreign woman in the white masculinist imagination.” She was described as “fitted for both productive and reproductive labor.” Her assumed “hypersexuality virtually ensured that a steady

supply of slaves” would be available for the building of the new empires (12). In *Killing The Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (2017), Dr. Dorothy Roberts explains that one of America’s first laws “concerned the status of children born to slave mothers and fathered by white men; a 1662 Virginia statute made these children slaves.” This marked Black female bodies with the stigma of “objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation” (52). Social regulation was the purview of white males within the imagined hierarchy of imperialism, as it was the duty of “civilized and highly evolved” to tame the wild and subdue the savage.

Pseudoscientific studies of the time sited the ways in which her body differed from the white male body as evidence “deviant sexuality...associated with animalistic characteristics” (Hobson 25). The Virginia legislation that decreed all children born of Black mothers to be slaves “laid [Black] women open to the most vicious exploitation. For a master could save the cost of buying new slaves by impregnating his own slave or for that matter having anyone impregnate her” (Hobson 12). The bodies of Black women were, like the land of the new world, fertile fields to be plowed, planted in and made to bear fruit for the new nations. Their ability to dramatically increase the wealth of the new empire did not endear them to their captors. This cemented their delineation as “monstrous hyper-women...overly abundant in their femaleness.” As such they exacerbated the “consistent hostility whites held toward black bodies...[that] reflected fears of encounters with black bodies during imperialist expansions of the African continent, as well as the fears of Black emancipation in the Americas” (Hobson 29).

The term “breeder” entered American literature via newspapers advertising Black women’s bodies for sale. According to Daina Ramey in *The Price for Their Pound of*



*Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation*

(2017), “Enslaved women entered the market as objects and producers of goods.” They were referred to as “breeding wenches or breeders” (26). Ramey explains that after 1808, “when the African supply source via transatlantic slave trading was abolished...the source [became] the natural, coerced, encouraged, and forced reproduction of enslaved women” (Ramey 13). The fabrication of an innate promiscuity was central to the construction of the Breeder narrative. Roberts reiterates this fact: the Breeder’s “reproductive values were crucial to the expansion of the institution [of slavery].” By the same token it was necessary to project onto this facet of the Black female body the stereotype of being “hyperfertile and lacking the capacity for self-control” (Roberts xix). This stereotyping ensured that her continued reproductive regulation by the state was a given. Black female bodies left to their own devices were a danger to the state.

Narratives penned after slavery and after the Jim Crow era still feature the Breeder prominently. She is Sethe in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) whose reckless childbearing leads her to infanticide. She is Sophia in Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) who spends her days fighting and procreating with her abusive husband Harpo. Breeder characterization is always positioned in such a way as to make the audience believe that “the key to solving America’s social problems is to curtail Black women’s birth rates” (Roberts 7). It posits the poor black woman as “the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers and rapists—men who become those things because of being immersed in her culture of poverty” (Roberts 18). Within this trope, the iconography of

the Black female body as the producer of legions of inferior Black bodies is as alive and well as it was 400 years ago.

At first glance, the Breeder appears to be the anti-thesis of Mammy, like some grotesque Black manifestation of the Madonna and Whore complex. She is a bad mother, while Mammy is immensely nurturing; she is lazy, while Mammy is hard working; she irresponsibly drains the coffers of white wealth, while Mammy protects it. Examined more thoroughly, it becomes clear that the two constructs are an indivisible duo. Mammy was portrayed as “impatient and violent with her own children [and was] considered untrustworthy in the slave quarters,” while Mammy’s tenderness towards white children “seems to exceed the force of natural affection for her own offspring” (Sanders 78). Mammy is “depicted with noticeable attachment to white children.” Morrison echoes this idea when she explains that, “Slave women are not mothers. They are natally dead. With no obligations to their offspring or their own parents” (Morrison 23) Roberts concurs that Mammy “compromised everything of herself and her connection to the Black community in order to exist in the white world” (Roberts 52). Mammy’s goodness and reliability are only certain when she is regulated by being in the white world. Outside of its parameters, she becomes just as feral as the Breeder. As such, the two tropes are not diametrically opposed or even mutually exclusive but serve to maintain the sentiment that Black female wildness is an ever-present possibility within any Black female body. Both tropes maintain the implication that Black female bodies are not be trusted or granted humanity under any circumstances.

In *Dawn*, by positing a Black female body in a post-apocalyptic world where she is forced to breed with aliens or be put into a cryogenic type suspended animation forever, Butler allows the audience access to the sacred psychic space of the inner world of the Breeder. Lilith Iyapo is a 28-year-old graduate student who “after the auto accident that killed [her husband and son] had decided to go back to college to decide what else she might do with her life.” She had been “in the Andes in Peru hiking towards Machu Picchu” when the war in which “a handful of humans tried to commit humanicide” occurred. The awakening that signals the novel’s beginning finds Lilith engaged in “a struggle to take in enough air to drive off nightmare sensations of asphyxiation” and ending with her heart “beating too fast, too loud” while she “curled around it, fetal, helpless.” The first indication of her nature is found in the following statement: “At an earlier Awakening, she had decided that reality was whatever happened, whatever she perceived.” Lilith has made her own physical experience central to her narrative. This is a mechanism she employs to survive captivity. Lilith finds herself in the usual “windowless, doorless cubicle.” While getting her bearings, she recalls earlier awakenings and specifically remembers that sometime between the second and third ones she “had acquired a long scar across her abdomen.” The scar highlights the gruesome nature of her new status as a commodity. “She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge.” However, Lilith does not allow this to weaken her resolve to escape; she continues to “search for some crack, some sound of hollowness, some indication of a way out of her prison.” She “spent hours vainly trying to solve the problem of how she might destroy [her captors]”; she even “threw a bowl of food—her best available weapon—at” the ceiling from which their voices

came. Even though she obviously understands that her situation is hopeless, Lilith clings to every shred of life and sanity that is available to her. She “worked out a whole series of physical exercises and did them after each of her long naps.” She “sang songs and remembered books she had read, movies and television shows she had seen... bits of her own life that had seemed so ordinary when she was free to live it” (10). Faced with the bleakest of situations, Lilith does not become suicidal or even intensely homicidal. She searches for ways in which she can improve the situation and uses them. Despite everything, Lilith persists. Her sense of self-preservation transcends all else.

During this pivotal awakening, Lilith is finally introduced to her captors in the form of “the shadowy figure of a man, thin and long haired.” He says he is here to take her outside to “Education. Work. The beginning of a new life.” When Lilith asks who he is, he responds, “I’m not a man. I’m not a human being.” Lilith discovers that it is “Humanoid but it had no nose, no bulge, no nostrils just pale gray skin. Darker gray hair on its head” that “grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat” and that “writhed independently, a nest of snakes, driven in all directions.” The creature’s name is Jdhaya. It tells her that she has been collected by an alien race called the Oankali. They were currently residing “in a ship in orbit somewhat beyond the orbit of the Earth’s moon.” It explains to Lilith that they “had collected all of you who survived your war. We collected as many as we could.” And that their “time and efforts had been restoring” Earth. Lilith was told that the Oankali were restoring the Earth for “use. You’ll go back there eventually.” When Lilith asks, “What to do you want of us?” Jdhaya only cryptically responds, “I can only say that your people have something we value.” This is the first mention of the unique biological characteristics that humans possess that are so magnetic

to the Oankali. This attraction is one of the novel's central themes. Oankali physiology makes human beings irresistible to them. To humans, Oankali are initially physically repulsive and terrifying. Lilith describes experiencing Jdhaya's appearance as "revolting" and only looks at it because it's a requirement for her release. Looking at it, "she imagined small tentacled sea slugs-nudibranchs-grown impossibly to human size and shape." When Jdhaya offers her food from its hand, her "teeth clenched, her hand shook so badly that she spilled half the stew." Jdhaya's hand was a "daisy hand. Palm in the center, many fingers all the way around" whose only saving grace was that "at least; they weren't tentacles." Despite this, Jdhaya tells her, "You're doing very well...several have tried to kill me" (15).

Lilith's presumed calmness is the result of dissemblance. She is assuming what Darlene Clark Hine refers to as "behavior and attitudes that create the appearance of openness and disclosure" (25). This dissemblance is the core of Lilith's characterization as Breeder. Butler allows us full access to her rich inner life via Lilith. The Oankali and other humans that she eventually is placed with, never fully understand the depth of her desires for freedom and autonomy. She retreats into dissemblance because she is completely vulnerable. When she examines the scar on her abdomen, she wonders "what had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be done?" She understands that her body could and may have been used in whatever way her captors saw fit. The possibility of rape is always looming in Lilith's mind. When she is given clothing at her final awakening and realizes that Jdhaya wears a similar outfit, she thinks, "Something to take off when the two of them got to know each other better? Good god" (11). From the novel's beginning, Butler insists that the reader experiences Lilith as very direct, highly

intelligent and assertive; but as the story unfolds, just as Hine explains, she creates a “secret, undisclosed persona” whose psyche was “unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones.” In this way, she “wraps a protective cloak around her inner self,” which is the true essence of who and what she is (Hine 24).

In some ways, the Oankali are adroit eugenicists. They see human beings as “fatally flawed.” This flaw originally made it “very hard for the ooloi to touch [them].” The flaw was so “alien” to them that it was repulsive and even painful. Jdhaya says, some Oankali find humans so disturbing “they left home for a while [when humans were introduced] That’s unheard-of behavior among us.” The Oankali “had never before seen so much life and so much death in one being.” Jdhaya explains that it is humans’ “genetic structure that disturbs” them. From their perspective humans “have a mismatched pair of genes” that “together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you.” Humans are “intelligent and hierarchical” and the pairing of these two genes was a “handicap.” They intend to breed out the hierarchical tendencies. Their classification as eugenicists is nullified by the reality that they have an overwhelming biological urge to mix with other species. “This is how we grow--how we’ve always grown. We couldn’t survive as a people if we were always confined to one world.” The meaning of their name Oankali was traders: “we trade the essence of ourselves...we do it naturally, we *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation.” The reproductive masterminds of the Oankali were a group known as the ooloi. Lilith is told that this group will control human conception and “make changes in your reproductive cells before conception.” She is told “your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you.

That's part of the trade. We're overdue for it." They have no choice but to exploit the useful properties of other species. Their biology demands that they use others as commodities. Jdhaya explains to Lilith the intensity of the urge: "Can you hold your breath Lilith? Can you hold it by an act of will until you die? ... We are as committed to the trade as your body is to breathing. We were overdue for it when we found you. Now it will be done to the rebirth of your people and mine" (26).

Lilith had already speculated that much of the sleep she fell into was drug induced and knew she would have had to have been anesthetized to have the procedure that had produced her abdominal scar performed and still be alive. So even though she is fully aware of being in the throes of xenophobia, she deduces that the degree of her fear seems unnaturally intense and remarks "I don't understand why I am so afraid of you. There were life forms on Earth that looked a little like you." Then asks, "Is it something you're doing? Something I don't know about?" This question is the reader's introduction to the Oankali use of chemical suggestions to transform and control other species they mate with. They used these suggestions to create their ship, which was a structure that was "alive, flesh, both plant and animal" that the Oankali "grew...and chemically induced to grow food and perform functions." The ship "loved [them]"; it had an "affinity, biological--a strong, symbiotic relationship" with them. "We serve the ship's needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be planetbound without it. For us that would eventually mean death." They have also created living transportation vehicles, "an animal, a tilio" that "moved on a thin film of slippery substance." In fact, the Oankali rarely build machinery only "when we have to...we don't like it, there is no trade" (32) They use touch to inject chemicals into other beings. Physical contact of any

kind can be used to achieve this, including contact with the ship since it is a living, breathing extension of them.

What is apparent to Lilith from her introduction to the Oankali is that they want her “dependent and trusting.” What she does not immediately realize is that any physical contact between them bonds her to them. Jdhaya explains that the scar is a result of the removal of a malignant cancer she was growing. This was performed by an ooloi who had “studied humans” by using “a special organ for their kind of observation” (62). Jdhaya says that observing and healing human beings allows ooloi to learn “everything that can be learned from your genes, your medical history and a great deal about the way you think.” Doing so also began the process of creating within Lilith the same type of biological affinity for the Oankali that the ship felt for them—a chemically induced falling into a perverse kind of love. Lilith is not fully aware of it until it is brought to her attention by other members of Jdhaya’s family. After Lilith came to live with them, she was placed under the care of the ooloi child, Nikanj. When asked if she preferred Jdhaya over Nikanj, she is surprised to realize that she found “Nikanj appealing in spite of itself” and “she liked it in spite of herself.” She remarks that “I see that everyone including Nikanj wants me to prefer Nikanj. Well you win, I do.” Later, when Nikanj begins its metamorphosis into adulthood, it alters Lilith’s body chemistry so that she can control certain aspects of the ship and come and go as she pleases. Once this is done, she intends to go outside and have a meal alone but is unable to. She “sighed, angrily took out extra food and went back to Nikanj” to help it eat (72). Like every other species they interact with, Lilith is chemically bound to and therefore trapped by the Oankali.



Additionally, Lilith's own fierce instinct of self-preservation holds her hostage. Jdhaya explains that Lilith's role is "to parent the first group" of humans to be sent back to Earth, to awaken them from suspended animation and "to teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be for them a new and frightening world" (64). In this way Lilith's trap becomes more binding because "her only other personal possibility was to refuse to awaken anyone—hold out until the Oankali gave up on her and went looking for a more cooperative subject." Her task "to weave [newly awakened humans] into a cohesive unit and prepare them to be the Oankali's new trade partners...was impossible." She asks herself, "how could she awaken these people, these survivors of war, and tell them that unless they could escape the Oankali; their children would not be human?" Her only plan is to convince them to "accept anything until they were sent to Earth. Then to run like hell at the first opportunity" (67).

Dissemblance, the appearance of acceptance while internally resisting, is Lilith's only way out of her captivity. By choosing to act in a way that will allow her to stay awake, Lilith chooses to survive. The choice to remain awake is a choice to return to Earth, but it also a choice to breed for the Oankali. Perhaps out of respect for her as the first human chosen to parent a group, Jdhaya offers Lilith another choice. When she tells him, "I wish your people had left me on Earth. If this is what they found me for," he responds, "I can't unfind you, but there is a thing I can do. I will never offer it again." He directs her to "touch me here, and I will sting you. You will die very quickly and without pain." Lilith "raised her hand, let it reach toward him," and "her hand hovered, almost brushing [a tentacle] by accident." She then "jerked her hand away and clutched it to her," crying "why didn't I do it? Why can't I do it" (43). Like the Oankali, Lilith is a captive to her

own biological urges and her body's inclination to follow them. She is trapped by the ferocity of her will to live.

Lilith's name is of course taken from that of the Hebraic mythological being. She is purported to have been the first wife of Adam, made from the same clay as him. She refused to be subservient to him and was therefore banished from Eden to live out eternity mating with demons and giving birth to aberrations. Considering the fact that Butler's original name for the trilogy in which Lilith appears was *Xenogenesis*, the Biblical reference seems fitting. In the novel, Lilith is the Black female body used as a producer of commodities for a system she exists outside of. Like the Breeder in the familiar Western trope, her choices are to bear children for the masters of the destructive system or die. Like many who were considered Breeders during the enslavement period, her will to live is much stronger than her desire to resign herself to death.

Through Lilith, Butler offers a counter-narrative of the Breeder by exhibiting how Black women's use of dissemblance creates a sense of self-determination that allows for self-preservation. With no possibility of escape, Lilith acts from her safe psychic space. Every decision she makes has its origins there. With the fate of all of humanity in her hands, given a set of unwanted choices and biological attachments that she cannot control, dissemblance is her only viable option. Lilith is the perfect example of how according to Hine, the dissembling Black woman does not allow her circumstances to "reduce [her] determination to acquire power to protect [herself]." When faced with a reality in which others "determine who would control [her] productive and reproductive capacities and [her] sexuality," Lilith uses dissemblance as a protective buffer to preserve

her sanity (Hine 23). She does not allow her abduction or captivity by the Oankali to define her. This is how she is able to remain relatively sane during almost two years of solitary confinement. It is from this point of view that she assesses the Oankali and decides what her reactions to them will be. Self-preservation is Lilith's defining characteristic. Every action she takes is the action most beneficial to her at the time. As one of the Oankali remarks to her, "You want to live. You won't squander your life" (120).

While Butler presents dissemblance as the rational choice given Lilith's circumstances, it is not the only choice. Paul Titus is "one of the humans who has chosen to stay here" instead of returning to Earth. A young, Black man who has been living among the Oankali since he was fourteen, Paul is the first human Lilith is allowed to see after her time inside her confinement cell. She describes him as "tall, stocky, as dark as she was...familiar, compelling. He was beautiful." Paul explains, "The Oankali said they'd send me back to Earth eventually if I wanted to go. But once I had been here for a while, I knew this was where I wanted to be. There is nothing that I care about left on Earth." He even asks Lilith, "Why do you want to go back? Why do you want to spend your life living like a cavewoman?" She responds, "we don't have to go back to the Stone Age. With what we already know and what the Oankali will teach us, we'll at least have a chance" (120). Paul explains that the Oankali give nothing for free: "everything is trade with them. When they're finished with us there won't be any real human beings left." Lilith admits that she doesn't "believe it has to be like that." And Paul, "looked at her with so much open, undisguised pity that she drew back angrily." He tells her sadly, "You haven't been awake for long." He says the Oankali know that she plans to learn and

run once she and other humans are on Earth and concludes with “And they know how to make you change your mind” (96).

Paul presents a challenge to Lilith’s adherence to dissemblance. He is also her introduction to the sexual nature of the Oankali’s attraction to other species. He explains that he sees ooloi as male and sees the other Oankali as “male and female eunuchs.” Of the two sensory arms that cover ooloi sexual organs, Paul warns her “they’re not arms, no matter what they tell us to call them.” And, “When those things grow in, ooloi let everyone know who’s in charge.” He then tells her “If you wanted it, they’d let you stay here with me” (107). And even though before meeting him she had felt it “irrationally important...to talk another human being” and had gotten lost and caused much chaos trying to do so, Lilith has no desire to stay with Paul Titus. He then “took her by the shoulders and tried awkwardly to kiss her” to which “she caught herself responding, in spite of her fear.” Knowing that they were always monitored, Lilith explains when he draws back that she is “not interested in putting on a show for Oankali” or “giving them a human child to tamper with.” Paul Titus retorts, “you probably already have” because “they didn’t have enough of us for what they call a normal trade.” So, “They had to make more.” When she asks how this was possible, Paul responds, “they can make people in ways I don’t even know how to talk about.” And he remarks, “Only thing they can’t do, is let us alone. Let us do it our own way. Until now” (101). Paul goes on to say his “genetic material has been used in over seventy children.” He says this while shaking Lilith, having become enraged with her refusal to copulate and stay with him. He shouts, “And I’ve never seen a woman in all the time I’ve been here.” Lilith then admits to herself that Paul was “the first human being she had seen in years and all she could do

was long to be away from him” (95). Paul tries to rape her and when she resists, he knocks her unconscious.

Blind rage notwithstanding, Lilith finds out soon enough that everything Paul Titus told her about the Oankali was true. She learns that “humans and Oankali tend to bond to one ooloi. The bond is chemical.” The bond makes them “want to avoid all contact with most people.” All Oankali communicate, see, hear, taste and perceive with their tentacles. They store the information they find internally, and then share it via physical contact with the ooloi. They had done so to Lilith and every other human captive. However, a deeper bond is created when ooloi use their “sensory arms” to create sexual connections with humans. They “stimulate nerves directly,” causing the human with whom they are connected to “remember or create experience to suit the sensations.” The ooloi provide “electrochemical stimulation of certain nerves, certain parts of the brain.” To the human body the “sensations [are] entirely real” (102). The effect is addictive. Further, while genetic trade was originally described to Lilith as mostly sterile scientific necessity, Nikanj reveals that “a partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us.” Humans it says, “are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination.” Nikanj says that “more than just the composition and the workings of your bodies...your personalities, your cultures...we are interested in those too.” When Lilith had awakened the requisite forty humans and they had been introduced to their ooloi and taken to the training portion of the ship to be prepared for Earth, Nikanj confessed “some of us thought we should hold off bonding with you until you were brought here. But most of us couldn’t wait” (110).

Despite the neurological stimulation and chemically induced bonds, humans consciously resist the Oankali sexually. This does not stop the ooloi, who tell them “your body has made a different choice,” referring to their subconscious desire to feel the sensations the ooloi provide. Butler’s novel in many ways can be seen as a treatise on consent—especially in the way the ooloi, like many rapists, place the blame at the feet of human attractiveness. From their position of power, they say, “in a very real way you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape” and “it might be better for both our peoples if we weren’t so strongly drawn to you” (151). Readers are not privy to Lilith’s sexual “conditioning,” but one passage in particular suggests it had been forced even though she grew to be “perversely eager” for sexual union with Nikanj. Her rape is alluded to when she watches it taking her chosen human lover Joseph the first time: “for a moment she saw Nikanj as she has [first] seen it, a totally alien being, grotesque, repellant beyond mere ugliness...she froze where she stood and had all she could to keep from turning and running away.” She wonders “how she had lost her horror of such a being” (161).

Lilith is acutely aware of the maze the Oankali have created around her. She knows they “had removed her so completely from her own people--only to use her as a Judas goat,” and “they had done it all so softly, without brutality, and with patience and gentleness so corrosive of any resolve on her part.” She is also sure that, “with all the questioning, testing and two years of round-the-clock observation,” they “must know her in some ways better than any human being ever had.” As such, “they knew how to manipulate her, maneuver her into doing whatever they wanted” (87). The degree of her dissemblance is so great that other humans believe her naïve or truly allied to the Oankali. Paul Titus says, “I wonder how many women they had to go through before they

came up with you. You're probably just what they want in ways I haven't even thought of" (96). Even her first human lover, Joseph Shing asks her angrily, "Do you see? Do you understand why they chose you—someone who desperately doesn't want the responsibility, who doesn't want to lead, who is woman" (124). This very much mirrors the experience of real-life Black women who, Hine explains, "collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self" (Hine 23). Shielding of the self allowed them to "function, to work effectively, to bear and rear children, to endure frustration...all while living in a clearly hostile" environment. This has led to an omission in historical records as "Black women have been reluctant to donate their papers to manuscript repositories" due to a "perennial concern with image born of centuries of vilification." But also because of "the adversarial nature of the relationship that countless black women have had with many public institutions and the resultant suspicion of anyone seeking private information." Thus, "so much of the inner life of Black women remains hidden" (Hine 23).

Lilith is not silent in the face of accusations that she is allied with the Oankali. However, humans perceive her actions and her words to be incongruent. In keeping with the Breeder narrative, they label her the equivalent of "the "Negro bed wench." In "Negro Bed Wench, Negro Please" (2013) Shafiqah Hudson defines this term as "an enslaved Black woman whose specific function was to have sex with the plantation's White owner, her master," who, even "though history has taught us that most enslaved African women were appropriately horrified at the idea of sexual contact with their enslavers [bed wenches] embraced this role and all the comparative privileges it brought." Bed wenches "even imagined that they were better than the rest of their

enslaved brothers and sisters, and used their privileged positions to thoroughly ingratiate themselves to their owners” (Hudson 2). Post-slavery “negro bed wench” characterizations include the tragic mulatto and in more modern times the light skinned or mixed (bi-racial) “Red Bone.” All of these are imaginings of Black women who supposedly fancy themselves superior. Central to this construct is the erroneous notion that despite being in the same socio-economic position as those around them, bed wenches have been given special privileges due to their proximity to whiteness.

Butler presents Lilith as never under any illusions about awakening other humans. The Oankali tell her “it is a good thing you’ll be doing. You’ll be in a position to help your people.” But she retorts, “They won’t trust me or my help. They’ll probably kill me. You don’t understand us as well as you think you do” (102). When it is time to begin her task, “She did not want to awaken anyone. She was afraid of these people and afraid for them.” She knows that “her job--to prepare them to be the Oankali’s new trade partners...was impossible.” She decides her goal is to “get them to accept their captivity, the Oankali, anything until they were sent to Earth. Then run like hell at the first opportunity.” Lilith understands that the ship was impenetrable because the Oankali “controlled it with their own body chemistry.” The only thing a human could do while on board was “make trouble and get put back into suspended animation or killed.” Time spent with the Oankali, intelligence and maturity made it clear to her that “the only hope was Earth.” She knows that she needs “thoughtful people who would hear what she had to say and not do anything violent or stupid.” In order to get to Earth, the group “must control themselves, learn all she could teach them, learn all the Oankali could teach them, then use what they had learned to escape and keep themselves alive” (165).



Dissemblance requires critical thinking skills, deductive reasoning and maturity. One cannot act rashly, must suppress natural emotional urges and above all else must stay the course. Lilith never believes that all the humans she awakens will be capable of or inclined to what Hine refers to as “perfecting the art of dissemblance” (12), but it was the only available route back to Earth, so she offers it anyway. It is no surprise to her when they view her “more like a trustee” than the fellow prisoner she was. To make matters more difficult, the Oankali do not help in any way with her awakening of people. She is left alone to “organize the humans into a coherent unit or [be] a scapegoat for whoever else organized them. She was on her own” (168). They enhance her strength, give her accelerated healing abilities and alter her body chemistry to allow her to move the walls inside the area she was placed in. “These were her tools,” and Lilith knows that “every one of them would make her seem less human.” She tells the Oankali, “nothing you could give me would be enough.” There are “several short, vicious fist-fights,” and she is attacked by a woman for not serving meat. Most dangerous of all, those who “favored action” over dissemblance begin to organize against her. They believe Lilith is “their jailer” and there is an “underlying tension and hostility.” Efforts to find ways to subvert and possibly even kill Lilith continue until a group of men try to kidnap and rape a woman. Lilith’s rage when she tears the group apart reveals the degree of her enhanced physical strength. Afterwards, “there was a shuffling of people. Some avoided Lilith because they were afraid of her...some came to her because they thought she would win.” All were afraid she was “not human or not human enough.” Shortly after this episode, the Oankali “drug their evening meal” and enter the room (184).

Once the Oankali arrive they pair off with human couples they had obviously pre-selected to mate with. Using their chemical suggestions, they “dull their natural fear of strangers” and “keep them from injuring or killing themselves.” The Oankali explain that they are “imprinting, chemical and social” with their human pairs. This involves their version of intercourse. The bond that this creates causes “humans not to want to be near each other for a while.” The sex makes many feel “humiliated as if they were demeaning themselves in alien perversion. Their humanity had been profaned” (185). In this confused state, they are moved to the simulated forest floor, the training room they must prove themselves in before returning to Earth.

Butler describes the training room as “brown muddy ground, thin scattered leaf litter, muddy water that flowed past the land and ceiling-sky of deep, intense blue.” Lilith warns Nikanj that humans “think they’re on Earth” and will “cut down trees, make rafts or boats.” He replies, “Let them row their boats to the walls and back.” He adds, “let them settle more firmly into their places with their ooloi” and “learn that it isn’t shameful to be together with us” (200). No humans learn that lesson. Eventually, even Lilith is forced to flee into the forest with her lover and others who “still don’t believe this isn’t Earth.” She knows the forest is a simulation but goes because her lover entreats, “don’t make me leave you.” Once in the forest, away from the Oankali and no longer drugged, Lilith’s former belief that “she might be doomed” and “must struggle not against nonhuman aliens, but against her own kind” becomes a reality. She and her lover are ambushed in their sleep by a group of humans who had fled before them, and her lover is killed. The Oankali intervene and Nikanj is badly injured in the skirmish. Lilith, who has “just lost Joseph...could not lose Nikanj too.” She “could not simply watch it die.” In

order to save it, she must strip and lie beside it so that it could use her flesh to help it heal. Lilith knows the other humans “would be certain now that she was a traitor” (238). And she is right.

The Oankali subdue the humans, regain control of the forest floor simulation and eventually send them to Earth. Lilith returns to the settlement one evening to find “only one fire with Nikanj near it.” Nikanj said it kept her on the ship “to save your life.” He explains that once they are on Earth, the Oankali expect the humans to run, as she had advised them. However, he tells her “they need us now, human sperm and egg will not unite without us.” Lilith tries to explain that even so, “you won’t get many back...some will think the human species deserves a clean death.” To which, Nikanj replies, “it is an unclean thing we want Lilith, is it unclean that I have made you pregnant with Joseph’s child?” The book ends with Lilith being even more firmly trapped by her own biology. She resigns herself to her reality knowing “at least she would get another chance with another human group...to teach them...but not to be one of them. Never.” Her final thought is that through her survival and her teaching, “if she were lost, humanity did not have to be” (248).

Like the Breeder fabrication in the collective imagination, Lilith appears to either be martyring herself or assimilating into Oankali society. From the vantage point of her safe psychic space, it becomes clear that not allowing herself to be destroyed is an act of resistance. This resistance creates a living legacy. As with other Black female bodies used for breeding, it is her resistance through dissemblance that grants those enslaved the only chance they have at life. In the end, it is descendants of those who chose to survive

that free the remaining captives. As Plisner mentioned, this positions Lilith as the “dark mother” through whom Butler “genetically modifies readership” by reframing mythology to place her Black female body in spaces it had previously been denied due to oppressive tropes. Choosing to survive also allows Butler to “rethink marginalized bodies” as Hampton stated. This positions Lilith in her Black female body as humanity’s new mother, where she occupies the center and not the margins of the myth. This positioning, according to Mann, allows Butler to “repudiate and reframe the vulgar constrictions placed on black maternity” (63). Real life Lilith’s, who used survival as a way to do the biomythographical work of rewriting the myths surrounding them include Ago Time, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dahomean princess who was taken into slavery, escaped and created the maroon settlement of Palamares and refused to return to Africa when emissaries were sent to get her. She chose instead to stay in Brazil and continue to free enslaved Africans. Lilith is Sally Hemings, who was kept in sexual bondage by Thomas Jefferson with a promise of freedom for her and all of her children, a promise that was never granted. Lilith is Winnie Mandela, who fought her whole life for the abolishment of apartheid, only to be treated as a traitor once it was defeated. She is the thousands of Black women who retreated within to try to find a way out of heinous conditions and constant sexual assault. She is every Black woman who made the impossible decision to survive a system created to destroy them. Butler’s reconstruction of this trope reveals that Lilith is the truth, and the Breeder imagining is the lie.

## CHAPTER IV: REIMAGINING THE RACE WOMAN IN NNEDI OKORAFOR'S *THE BOOK OF PHOENIX*

“A story is not a story until it is told. I’ve always believed that a story is best told in many ways.”

Nnedi Okorafor, *The Book of Phoenix*

Published in 2015, *The Book of Phoenix* is the fifth novel by prolific author and associate professor of creative writing and literature at the University of Buffalo, Nnedi Okorafor. The novel is the apocalyptic prequel to her post-apocalyptic continuations of the narrative in *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010). *The Book of Phoenix* tells the story of the speciMen created in a laboratory called Tower 7 by a group of scientists referred to as the Big Eye. It chronicles the life of human bomb Phoenix Okore. She is a being who can completely burn herself to ash, reconstruct these ashes into a human form and live again. Phoenix follows a trajectory from complacent scientific subject to revolutionary catalyst for change and ultimately to primal destructress of the world. While the related novels *The Shadow Speaker* and *Who Fears Death* are steeped in the mystical and magical, *The Book of Phoenix* expounds upon more scientific and technological themes. Phoenix, who is something akin to an organic cyborg, falls in love, escapes captivity, travels to Africa and returns to the Americas to free other speciMen all the while using tiny hand-held devices called “portables” and accessing an internet-like global digital community. It is the story of horror undertaken in the name of science and progress and of how marginalized members of society tend to suffer most during such “research.” As Mann mentioned regarding *Dawn*, *The Book of*

*Phoenix* eschews the happy ending in favor of a hopeful beginning. Eventually, Phoenix's disgust with the corruption of the world leads her to burn it to ash with the force of an atomic bomb. If the story did not begin after the apocalypse she causes, the reader would have no reason to believe anyone survived. *The Book of Phoenix* is the least critically analyzed of all Okorafor's novels, but its compelling storyline makes it possible to locate some analytical mention of it in interviews and analyses of *Who Fears Death* and *The Shadow Speakers*.

In "Nnedi Okorafor: Exploring the Empire of Girls' Moral Development" (2017), Sandra Lindow observes that Okorafor has "an ingrained acceptance of and interest in the Other and a blurring of boundaries between human, plant, and animal" (1). Lindow also references Okorafor's frequent mention of childhood vacations spent in Nigeria, which she says allow the writer to use "her memories to create sensory-rich stories about a past, present, and future Africa" (2). Lindow notes that many of Okorafor's novels follow "a similar pattern where young adult viewpoint characters must overcome negative self-images, learn to channel their anger, establish alliances, gain agency, and begin to understand sexual intimacy" (2). Lindow explains that as "cultural outsiders, Okorafor's protagonists are well positioned to question cultural values" (3). She argues that Okorafor's use of fantasy make some of the ideas presented in her novels easier to digest, explaining that "the need to control women has historically been a major social issue. Perhaps it is easier to analyze the damage traditional culture can do to girls when the story is set in a faraway and magical world" (4). Lindow points out that Okorafor's protagonists persevere beyond the limits of societal conditioning and perceived notions about their othered bodies: "Despite cultural and paternal opposition,

Okorafor's protagonists passionately believe in the truth of their own experiences as well as their right to give voice to it. Their explorations evolve from a desire to know where they fit within their own worlds" (5). This search for belonging fuels the protagonists' desires to sojourn into the unknown and the dangerous. However, she says "Okorafor stacks the deck by providing her protagonists with magical tools to aid their survival" (6). Lindow emphasizes the relevance of these journeys by explaining that "Okorafor's protagonists' magical talents develop through study, practice, and interaction with difficult environments. They gain skills regarding how to do things. Magic may be an unfamiliar realm of knowledge for them, but there are rules that can be learned in order to use magic safely. Although it can be argued that their initial departures from parental authority can be seen as impulsive, their goals are exemplary" (7). Lindow positions the departures, or in Phoenix's case escape, from home as necessary for each protagonist to be fully actualized. In addition to leaving home, Okorafor's protagonists resist the expectation to be voiceless and powerless: "Okorafor's protagonists are not conventional. What stands out about young women's moral development in these novels is that Okorafor allows her protagonists to be angry. They believe they have the right to speak out—even against authorities" (8). Lindow puts Okorafor's work in a wider context: "As a third-wave feminist, Okorafor does not take women's rights for granted, but rather sees them as part of a continuing battle that must be fought and refought in various times and places. The entire series of stories and novels appears to be a reaction to the negative excesses of patriarchy (among other things)" (10). Lindow interprets Okorafor's protagonists as catalysts for change. Indeed her assessment—that their othered status and the oppressive conditions created around them propel them towards what Mann refers to

as “world-shattering” actions—dovetails nicely with my view of the characteristics of the biomythographical novel.

In 2015, Kristin Centorcelli, interviewed Okorafor just after the novel’s release. Okorafor explains that the book is about “a woman whose personal need for freedom changes the narrative of humankind” (1). She describes Phoenix as the story’s “narrator and purpose” who is “angry, brash, loyal and curious” (1). Okorafor explains her process: “as inspiration for this novel ...the mystery and the effects of the Great Book in *Who Fears Death* stayed with me, too. So did that world and how it came to be—the apocalypse that caused it all. Couple all this with the fury I experienced visiting one of my students in a Chicago Prison and the fact that it was the very evening *Who Fears Death* won the World Fantasy Award and you have the catalyst for this novel.” In the same year, Okorafor wrote an article for the *Journal of the Fantastic Arts*, entitled “Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence” expounding upon her inspiration for *The Book of Phoenix*. This is her opening: “I was in jail the evening I became the first black person to win the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel” (21). She goes on to recount that as a professor at the University of Chicago she worked in the notorious south side. Many of her students “are often the first in their families to attend college. Many are the ones who pushed through, despite their circumstances. They are the ones who sought education as the best way out. Many of them are the anomalies and hopes in their families” (21). She juxtaposes this reality with her own upper middle-class upbringing and education in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Chicago. She admits that driving through the projects of the south side made her nervous: “whenever I’d pass those looming crumbling concrete towers, I’d roll up my windows and you should have seen how fast I drove.



Those towers looked so terrifying.” She says that one of her best and brightest students Jermaine Reed, who had grown up there, corroborated all the horror the sight of the towers made her feel. Her actions and Jermaine’s memories are part of what she recreates in the novel. The rest is from her experience going to visit Jermaine in the “Cook County Jail by the Sears Tower,” where what struck her “most poignantly was that they were all young black men. Locked up like rats. Wasting time. Wasting away” (22). She says she imagined a tower, fifty years in the future: “This future tower was full of people who’d been genetically created, born or raised there, and were watched closely by military security called the Big Eyes. The genetically created people in the tower did not know what freedom was because they had never been free. These people were not feared. Most of them were black, all of them were being used, and some of them were dangerous” (24). Okorafor concludes by connecting fiction with reality, “When I consider empires and worlds, this is a prime example of how I create them. I don’t. They are already there. I live in them, am affected by them and I write about them. In return, sometimes those worlds write about me” (25).

Lindow’s analysis and Okorafor’s interview and article position *The Book of Phoenix* as a biomythographical text written from a woman --centered perspective, with radical reimaginings of society and othered members within society. My reading will uncover the novel as an exploration of one young Black woman’s purely autonomous actions. Phoenix Okore is the ultimate anti-mule.

The pervasiveness of the Mammy and Breeder fabrications in the collective imagination had a profoundly devastating effect on how Black women were perceived. In

addition to tangible physical threats posed by racism and sexism, Black women also found themselves battling psychological dangers created by imaginary beliefs that defined and threatened to destroy them. The best recorded opposition to these imaginings may have been the stance of well-known intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune, but the work of these women was just the public face of private battles that virtually all Black women faced on a daily basis. A new seemingly positive imagining arose as a result of this shared struggle, the Race Woman. The term was first mentioned in 1945 in *Black Metropolis* by St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton. For the purposes of this work, I am using the definition given by Assata Shakur in her autobiography *Assata* (1987). She explains, “Race men and Race women remain consistently confrontational with the ideas, people, institutions, and/or nations that threaten the well-being of the Black (Afrikan)Race” (132). In its simplest form, Race Woman is a term used to describe a Black woman who works for the liberation of Black people. The term and the concept it references are problematic because both, although seeming to rebel against it, are steeped in the usage of the Black female body as a commodity. In order to fully grasp this conundrum, one must understand the nuance of respectability politics in the Black community.

Respectability politics, first articulated in 1993 by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, is defined as “attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members and show their social values as being continuous and compatible with dominant values ...rather than challenging the mainstream for its failure to accept differences” (82). By far the best example of this sentiment as it relates to Black women

is in the creation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, founded in 1896. The NACW became "the largest and most enduring protest organization in the history of Afro-Americans" (Hine 25). Its sheer numbers attest to the importance its ideals held within the Black collective imagination. The group's primary objective was "to attack the derogatory images and negative stereotypes of Black women's sexuality" (Hine 25). The danger in this seemingly laudable goal is that instead of demanding that Black women be perceived as full human beings, the organization encouraged a "Victorian sense of modesty" which required Black women to "downplay, even deny, sexual expression" (Hine 26). Although this reaction to precarity of the Black female body is completely understandable, it suggests that good manners, modest attire, and a docile demeanor will protect Black women from the ravages of racism and sexism. At its core, it is another method of blaming Black women for the ills of society and for the heinous acts that they fall victim to. This way of thought is steeped in the same "global masculinist imperialism" responsible for creating the system that commodifies Black femaleness. In keeping with this patriarchal sentiment, the Race Woman gives precedence to matters of race over matters of gender. She is a quiet, docile servant of Black people, read Black *men*. The Race Woman is a category of the Mule.

Similar to the Mammy, the Mule trope differs in that she is specifically a product of the Black collective imagination. Mammy is the only space Black femaleness is allowed in the white collective imagination and therefore dominates mass media as it is largely a white creation. By contrast, the Mule represents the only acceptable space Black femaleness is allowed to occupy in the Black collective imagination. Black femaleness performed outside of this trope is deemed a detriment to the race and is ostracized. The

term Mule is taken from Zora Neale Hurston's description of Black women as those forced to carry the loads of Black men. Hurston's genius is evident in the use of Mule in this way as it carries the implication of dehumanization that is inherent in the caricature. While simultaneously fleeing from and fighting against their characterization as Mammys and Breeders, Black women run smack into a new characterization as a Race Woman/Mule, yet another fabrication that reviles their wild Black femaleness and only finds it useful as a controlled commodity. Real-life examples of the effect of the Mule characterization are found in Stokely Carmichael's insistence that the only place for a "female in SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] is prone," Eldridge Cleaver's usage of Black women's labor in the Black Panther Party while being very open about his preference for relationships with white women, and even in Elijah Muhammed's continued sexual violation of young secretaries in the Nation of Islam. Within these organizations that did so much work for Black liberation, the Black female body was still utilized as a workhorse and sexual outlet. The liberation being so desperately sought, was not her own, but the liberation of the Black man, the implication being that his full liberation required her continued subjugation. She was to fight to be liberated from physical and sexual servitude from whiteness, but physical and sexual servitude to Black maleness was her supposed natural place. A Race Woman dedicated her life and her resources to creating a reality in which Black maleness could dominate her, as it "rightfully" should.

The gravity of this dilemma was not lost on Black female freedom fighters. Even within the NACW, Mary Church Terrell made this declaration in her initial address as its first president: "their objectives could only be accomplished by the mothers, wives,

daughters and sisters of this race.” She was clear that “our peculiar status in this country...seems to demand that we stand by ourselves” (Hine 27). Terrell’s sentiments were echoed in the Cohambee River Collective Statement’s explanation: “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us.” In truth, Black women found themselves at the apex of liberation movements and did not always have the luxury of imagining that they could operate solely according to their own unique needs and objectives. Within a context divorced from modern feminist thought and also a lived experience very much tied to the socio-economic status created by Black male wealth, Black women were not always able to conceive of an existence outside of phallogentricity. Until very recently no other women were able to conceive of this level of liberation either. Within this context, the characterization of Race Woman was quite frankly, the lesser of many evils. As Brittany Cooper so succinctly conveys in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017) the “literary production, philosophies, and direct political actions of these public intellectual ‘race women’...built robust proto-black-feminist discourses, frameworks, and blueprints” (25). They were the best Black foremothers had to give at that point in time.

From the safe psychic space of her inner world, Nnedi Okorafor reconstructs the Race Woman trope in *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). The novel exhibits what happens when the Mule does not pick up the load assigned to her by Black maleness and instead uses her strength and power to serve her own needs and desires. Phoenix is the messianic protagonist of the narrative, as well as a work of scripture called “the Great Book.” In the novel, the Great Book is unearthed in “a cave full of computers. A tomb of old, old technology from the Black Days, the times of the Dark People, the Era of the Okeke.

These computers were used to store huge amounts of information separate from digital spaces.” Sunuteel, who discovers the book thinks “Little good this did; virtual or physical, it was all dead, forgotten, rotten.” He is “Okeke and therefore a descendant of the evil that caused the goddess Ani to bring the deserts.” He knew “of the poisonous Black Days and their most poisonous genius gadgetry” but “he had always wanted to see these ancient computers.” Sunuteel accidentally “brushed against an ‘on’ pad” and the computer accessed the “portable clipped inside the pocket of his dusty pants” that then “wirelessly received a large file” from it. The file is one of the entries that will become the Great Book. It was created using a tool called “memory extraction” which was a way to “pull out and capture people’s memories right from their minds” (22). In this entry, Phoenix shares her story in keeping with the components of biomythography. She begins “there is no book about me...no matter I shall create it myself...I will use the old African tools of story: spoken words...during shadowy times, spoken words carry further than words, typed, imaged or written” (3).

When the novel opens, Phoenix has accepted the definition the Big Eye has given her: “I was an abomination. I’d ready many books and this was clear to me.” The 28<sup>th</sup> floor of Tower 7 was her home. The Towers “were about research.” There were seven towers all located in American cities but “not part of the American government...technically” (15). As part of the research on her, she had been given an “e-reader packed with 700,000 books of all kinds.” She read half of them in a year. She had “listened to spiritual tellings of long-dead African and Native American shamans.” She had “read the Bible, the Tanakh and the Koran.” She had studied “the Buddha and meditated until [she] saw Krishna.” As such, she “understood abomination.” She was

also given “top secret files on Tower 7” because “they did not see me as a threat.” She was “a perfectly contained classified speciMen” and “for a speciMen knowledge was not power.” Tower 7 was on the island of Manhattan which is mostly underwater at the time of the story. This location made it an optimum place for “top surveillance and security.” Each tower had “specializations” and Tower 7 is for “aggressive genetic manipulation and cloning.” The people and creatures in it are “deformed, mentally ill or just plain dangerous.” Phoenix declares, “I was dangerous” (13).

Phoenix is the absolute embodiment of wild Black femaleness. Her body exudes lifeforce energy which wildly stimulates the growth of living things around her, plants in particular. At the novel’s beginning, she remarks that she was given a hoyia plant “five days ago and already it was growing so wildly that it was creeping across my windowsill and had wrapped around a chair...It had grown two feet overnight” (23). When she facilitates the destruction of Tower 7, her “light shined on the plants and tiny trees of the lobby and they began to grow wildly, stirred and amazed with life.” Her description recalls the fascination Europeans had with Black female fecundity and how it was associated with the lush, fertile soil of the New World. Phoenix is also “super mortal,” meaning she can “live and die to live and die again.” She is “speciMen, beacon, and reaper, life and death, hope and redemption.” She is able to heat her body to a temperature so high that her “clothes burn and then [her] flesh. There is no pain” because her nerves burn away before she can feel it. Part of her was created by the scientists that speciMen call the “Big Eye” because they are always watching. The Big Eye had “constructed the sperm and the egg with materials of over ten Africans, from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Benin” (32). Then they had combined that with a ten-year-old

captive they had stolen from Ethiopia “with DNA from Lucy the mitochondrial Eve who carried the complete genetic blueprint of the human race.” They had placed her zygote in the womb of an “African-American woman” and once she was born “wouldn’t even let her kiss [Phoenix] goodbye.” The surrogate had “eventually gone mad and had to be committed to a psychiatric ward.” Her ability to disintegrate and re-integrate made the Big Eye consider her a “reoccurring small nuclear bomb.” Therefore, they “raised [her] like an android” (10).

Phoenix’s unique genetic construction recalls the ethnic background of all Africans enslaved in Americas. As Michael A. Gomez explains in *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998), “[t]he African American represents an amalgam of the ethnic matrix; that is, the African American identity is in fact a composite of identities” (52). Like those original enslaved Africans, Phoenix is also considered their property and because of their conscious breeding of her, their creation. Of this she notes, “I wasn’t human enough to be a threat. The Big Eye didn’t think they needed to put a leash on me because my leash was in my DNA” (42). Phoenix even mentions the correlation: “they saw me as they saw the Africans made slaves hundreds of years ago. They saw me as many Arabs saw Africans slaves over millennium ago” (40). It is in this background that the other part of her self exists, the part that was not created by the Big Eye. As her comrade Mmuo tells her, “you are an African, too so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world” (116).



While she is in Tower 7, Phoenix's lover Saeed tries to enlist her as a freedom fighter. She is uninterested. He asks, "why don't you feel rebellion in your heart? Don't you ever dream of getting out of here? Away from all the Big Eye?" Her response reveals two crucial points. First, she has accepted the Big Eye's explanation that her wild Black femaleness must be contained and second, she is not moved by the thought of rebellion. When Saeed says he wants the life of a "mild speciMen" who are allowed to "go out and live normal lives," Phoenix answers, "Mild speciMen aren't special. I'd never want that. I like who I am" (17). Her answer reveals great naivete but also, in the midst of the horrors of her life, a positive self-image. Phoenix does not want to be anything less than what she is. Her self-image is so intact that she does not move, does not act until she feels the impulse to do so. Her rootedness is exhibited by the fact that after Saeed mentioned it to her, she admits that "somewhere deep in my psyche I did wish to get out of the tower." She even whispers "Rebellion" to herself and says, "the word bloomed from my lips like a flower" (16). Still, she does not immediately act rebelliously. She is not moved until Saeed appears to have committed suicide based upon something horrible he saw in Tower 7. His loss spurs her into the revolutionary actions that are the focal point of the narrative. Phoenix decides upon these actions "in the same way I decided I wanted to escape Tower 7, on impulse." She is guided by her own internal compass. No matter her connection to other individuals, Phoenix trusts her own personal convictions to lead her towards her purpose. As the personification of wild, Black femaleness, she initially sees herself as "dangerous." However, once she releases herself, she embraces this quality and allows it to take precedence in her life. Her actions are wild, Black femaleness unleashed. When she simultaneously escapes from and

destroys Tower 7, she expresses pleasure at “Seeing the Big Eye cower, seeing their fear and raw horror had a strange effect on me. I felt powerful. I felt lethal. I felt hopeful” (28).

Surrendering to the enormity of all that she is deepens and transforms Phoenix’s powers allowing her to communicate with other life forms. After the destruction of Tower 7, she speaks to a seed presented to her by The Backbone, the massive tree that Tower 7 was built around. The Backbone “pushed it up from below” using “powerful thin roots.” As she focuses on the seed, it describes its journey through “pure quiet” and “billions and billions of stars.” Its “direction was clear. The pull was strong. The small blue planet Earth.” The seed entreats her to return it to its original home in Wulugu, Ghana, and she does so by means of the other result of her acceptance of her power. She explains this evolution by saying, “It was quiet where I was, but inside I was burning with fury. I carried it with me into the darkness of death, and when I brought it out into the light of life, it had evolved, matured, intensified, grown wings” (31). Fleeing from the destruction of Tower 7 and the pursuing Big Eye, she “felt a hardness and softness attached” to her. She looks back and discovers “wet, brown wings” with a “wingspan over thirty feet.” As surprising as their appearance is, she recognizes them: “My wings were mine. They made sense. My feet kept trying to leave the ground.” Phoenix’s ability to fly represents the ability of fully embraced, unfettered wild, Black femaleness to raise the Black woman above her the previously accepted narratives. Phoenix represents the Black female body liberated from being imagined as a mule, as something “dangerous” that needs to be “controlled.” Freed from these imaginings she can fully BE and this

freedom allows her to soar. As another winged being expressed to her, “It is good to fly. There is freedom in it” (53).

Okorafor reconstructs the Race Woman trope by imagining a movement in which the woman is not passive. Mmuo, who had been imprisoned in Tower 7 with Phoenix, had led a rebellious group of university students known as WaZoBia against the corrupt Nigerian government prior to being captured. From his father he had learned to “put faith in science and in the Old [magical] Ways of the Yoruba, Efiks and Ogonis.” This knowledge enabled him to walk through wood. Once captured by the Big Eye, his cells had been mixed with those of an “intelligent alien from Mars” with “technological knowledge about molecular control and reorganization.” After this merger, he could slip through any substance. Even so, he had to confess that because of a compound the Big Eye put on the walls, he was “trapped in Tower 7 until [Phoenix] got him out.” Saeed had been “indentured at the age of six to a physically and verbally abusive pharmacist.” Afterwards, he had escaped and “lived for three years on a digital dumpsite making money by burning old computer parts and selling the exposed copper wiring.” The Big Eye had captured him there in Cairo and he was “able to survive on glass, metal shavings, crumbles of rust, sand and dirt.” There had even been “a man with enormous wings...suspended in mid-air” kept under a giant glass dome in Tower 7. When Phoenix speaks with him after freeing him, she asks “Why were you under that glass dome?” Then she realizes, “You let them capture you!” Mmuo and Saeed “had been conspiring” and “had a plan of escape.” They both knew that the “Towers changed life...all over the world” and that “the core of the towers’ philosophy has always been rotten.” They had wanted to “make it collapse on itself.” Instead of executing this plan, Saeed had become

enraged when he saw a screen in Tower 7 showing scenes of “a place and time where mounds and mound of Africans were dead” (37). He began to destroy the room that the screen was in and was beaten by the Big Eye and presumed dead. None of these three extremely powerful beings was capable of initiating what Phoenix had begun on impulse. She alone had decided that “since no one else seeks revenge for all that the Big Eye have done, I will.” Once Saeed is found still alive and all four begin the destruction of the towers, Mmuo says, “Phoenix this is a movement. You started a movement!” Phoenix is not a follower of male dictates. Freed creatures chanted, “The Phoenix Okore burned our chains” (115). It was her face emblazoned across media screens and “marked as a dangerous, murderous speciMen” in the “in depth news stories.” Phoenix is the harbinger, the igniting spark and the animating force of the movement. The winged man says, “You are change Phoenix. Wherever you go, you bring revolution” (130).

At the story’s beginning Phoenix accepts the narrative others create about her and the other speciMen. She accepts herself as “abomination.” She believed she was too dangerous to be freed and accepted her captivity as a necessity. She had even heard gunshots her whole life in the tower. She knew they meant “something or someone who’d gotten out of control was dead or severely injured.” Their existence was “common knowledge.” In fact there were, “all kinds of people who unknowingly accepted the existence of the towers. Who reaped the fruits of the tower’s callous labor” (122). Phoenix lived that commonly accepted narrative and accepted it as her fate until she obeyed her impulse to escape. By doing so she destroys the tower and she begins the process of defining herself. She becomes aware of her rich inner world and speaks from it. From that point forward, Okorafor wields biomythography as a weapon against

misrepresentation through Phoenix's reconstruction of herself. With it she consciously sculpts her tale, masterfully controls her tale and thoroughly conveys her own unique experience. She defines herself using this art: "My name is Phoenix. I don't know who named me, but I am named well" (167). When she has to die the second time and take her lover Kofi with her, she requests that he live stream it so that their experience can be given exposure. She explains, "A story is not a story until it is told," and "a story is best told in many ways" (145). She understands that the power of the narrative is part of what the Big Eye have harnessed and therefore they do not want her departure from Africa to be known because they know this power is strong there. "Africans like to tell stories, and stories travel and germinate. And sometimes, stories evolve into trouble." In direct opposition to the Big Eye control of the media, Phoenix speaks defiantly because she believes her story and the stories of those like her are worth telling. "All stories must be told." Finally, she is acutely aware of the efficacy of biomythography as a tool against oppression and says, "I speak my life into existence with each expressed breath I take" (156). Phoenix engages the other speciMen trapped in the towers, concerned human beings and everyone else with a masterful use of video broadcasts, image posting and spoken narratives shared with those she meets. As the reimagined Race Woman, she uses biomythography to embolden the masses as effectively as charismatic male leaders use speeches and manifestos. She speaks in her own unique voice and rallies the masses to see her as she sees herself.

As the reimagining of the narrative of the Race Woman, *The Book of Phoenix* is the consummate Pan-African speculative fiction odyssey. As such, Okorafor situates it firmly in the Afrofuturist world. She quotes the first line in Butler's *Dawn* after

Phoenix's first re-integration. "Alive. Still alive. Alive again" (62). The line from Yeats that inspired Achebe is cited as an inspiration for Saeed also: "Things fall apart the center cannot hold" (87). Okorafor also connects this story to her other great works of science fiction. Seven, the winged man is one of the "Leopard People" from *Akata Witch* (2011). Mmuo knew of the pipeline guarding cyberspiders from *Binti* (2015). From the sky Phoenix sees the sea monster about to attack Lagos in *Lagoon* (2014). And the book ends with the statement that the rest of the Great Book will be told to Onyesonwu from *Who Fears Death* (2010). Beyond science fiction, the overall Pan-African theme is of a group of people of African descent whose biology is being capitalized upon and commodified. All African people work together in the novel. The original finder of the tale is an Igbo man married to an Ethiopian woman. This couple is mirrored by the Ethiopian couple who originally harbor Phoenix when she first re-integrates after escaping Tower 7. Even though the news says otherwise, they knew that "what they really did in Tower 7 was evil and cruel" (39). They feed her and distract the Red Eye so she can flee. When she sprouts wings and transports the alien seed to Africa a Sierra Leonian woman feeds her and gives her a burka to cover her wings saying, "you will need to pick and choose who sees what you are." Landing in Ghana and planting the seed she "had an audience, some screamed but most sighed and murmured with awe" (65). She stays for a time in Wulugu, Ghana and is given the name "Okore" which means eagle. She is also embraced by a community and a lover, Kofi. He was named for great African leader Kofi Annan. Upon returning to America to destroy the rest of the towers she, Mmuo and Saeed are assisted by a Rastafarian and by all of the people of St. Croix, Virgin Islands. The narrative highlights the similarities and connections among all African cultures.

Most importantly, once the other speciMen hear of Phoenix's movement and see it as their signal to rebel, they identify Phoenix as their version of great African freedom fighter Nat Turner. They said "when Phoenix struck Nat Turner's story came to life." They called themselves the Ledussee. Meaning "let us see...what will happen now that we are freed. Let us see what you've created. Let us see the future" (155). It is important to note that the Ledussee do not refer to Phoenix as the female Nat Turner. As the reconstructed Race Woman she is THE embodiment of the story of Nat Turner.

The story concludes with Phoenix reconnecting fully to the wild Black femaleness of her origins. Though it did not start *en medias res*, as is the case with all stories worth telling, the end is actually the beginning. While on the island of St. Croix Phoenix uses a power that the winged man let her know she had evolved into, quantum leaping. From St. Croix she "slips" as she calls it, back to New York to finally meet "the woman who pushed me into the world. Alone. The woman who was willing to die for me. My mother." While researching the towers, Phoenix had clandestinely obtained information about the whereabouts of the woman who had carried her. She finds her in an asylum in New York. She decides to go to her impulsively, saying simply "the moment called me, and I answered it" (215). She finds her mother in a glass cell, and while she believes she is sneaking into her room she realizes "Her eyes were wide open. She was staring right at me as I poked my head out." Her mother was only 28 years old but was a "frail quivering woman whose skin was loose and pockmarked." Her mother wheezed and "willed herself to speak." She whispers "Phoenix" and tells her "I gave you that name. You came out. I took one look at you, and I spoke your name" (220). Her mother had lost her three other daughters and her husband in a house fire. The Red Eye had promised that she could keep

and raise the being they impregnated her with and promised a large sum of money and a luxurious lifestyle. Instead, they had taken Phoenix from her and she had contracted “cancer from constant exposure to her light and her strange blood.” Before dying, Vera Takeisha Thomas gives a command, “Phoenix, give ‘em hell. You hear me girl? Give ‘em HELL” (231). It is taboo in African and subsequently African American culture to disobey the command of your mother. The mother’s command is also understood to carry with it the power to make the requested action a reality. Up until her mother uttered these words, Phoenix had allowed her power to be diluted and her actions corralled by the maleness that surrounded her.

Phoenix had felt an urge towards utter destruction since she first saw fear on the faces of the Big Eye. She was, after all, created to be a bomb. As she flew back from Ghana after planting the alien seed, the winged man had flown up to her and admonished, “I know what you are planning...But Phoenix you can’t just go to the Backbone.” He told her that she would be “captured quickly.” Even though he introduces her to quantum leaping during this encounter and she uses it to destroy Tower 1; she discards her own plan. Afterwards, she returns to New York and the Backbone to “burn it and the rest of this remorseless city to ash” and is interrupted by a reunion with Mmuo. He asks, “will you kill everyone in this city” (121). Then Saeed appears and asks her if she is responsible for the destruction of Tower 1 and 7. She says “yes,” and he explains “we want to do that to all the towers. We want to set every speciMen free.” She explains her decision to work with them by sharing an intense premonition-like feeling she has: “What they are doing in the towers will be the end of humanity if they are not stopped. We are living in darkness and, I swear to you, one day the Author of All Things will pull a star to



this planet and burn all the evil away, taking all the good with it. But if we bring down the towers, maybe this will not happen” (147). She joins with Mmuo and Saeed, and their way of bringing down the Towers differs greatly from her own. They gather in Mmuo’s apartment, discuss next steps and sneak into the Library of Congress to obtain complete information about the Towers. Their style of rebellion lacks the fire of Phoenix’s impetuosity and the fury of her quick deadly strikes. Their way is methodical and gradual. When they reach St. Croix and ambush Tower 4, Phoenix encounters a Big Eye creation that she relates to as “sister.” “She was the same height as me. She wore a white dress like the ones I liked to wear. She was the color of rich crude oil. An African woman” (197). She identifies herself as a speciMen the Big Eye have named HeLa, “after Henrietta Lacks immortal cells.” Phoenix confesses that she believed that “Henrietta’s cells had been used in the research that led to her [own] creation.” HeLa tells Phoenix that the Big Eye “always said you’d come, they said our blood draws itself.” HeLa was not created by the Big Eye; her body chemistry was similar to Henrietta Lacks because she “has life in her blood. It is a river of time.” She explains that “They come here. They take my blood. They sell it” (198). She says, “there are seven men, billionaires who will never die” because they have “injected her blood into their veins.” HeLa asks Phoenix to kill her so that no one else can have access to her blood. She concludes, “in a matter of years, the world will belong to those seven men because of me.” HeLa was killed in the skirmish to destroy Tower 4, but it was her pronouncement that re-ignited the fire of annihilation in Phoenix and led her to go see her mother. She watched the children they had set free from the tower playing and asked herself, “how many Americans walked around with fresh young organs harvested or grown from the cells of these children.” She

concedes, “this filthy world riddled with the drinkers of HeLa’s blood; people that would live forever, infecting the world to its very soul” (199). Her interaction with HeLa is the initial reconnection with wild Black femaleness that compels her to reunite with her mother. HeLa’s declaration begins the process of releasing her from the tedium of sluggish male action. Meeting her mother completes the process.

When she returns to St. Croix after her mother dies in her arms, she finds that the Big Eye have killed Mmuo and captured Saeed. Phoenix as the embodiment of wild Black femaleness has been completely unfettered by her sister and empowered by her mother. She is thoroughly unleashed. She is now free to remember and feel her purpose deep within her bones. She decides to “Kill everything. Everything should die. Let it all start from the beginning. In the right way.” She was freshly disgusted by the Big Eye and by “human civilization that silently, attentively, ignorantly watched and benefitted.” She flies and ignites herself and the rest of the world. She understands herself to be an emissary of the Igbo Goddess of all things, Ani. She explains that Ani “was horrified by what she saw.” She “reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. I am that sun. Ani asked me to wipe the slate clean” (224). Suunutel, the old Igbo man who has been listening to Phoenix’s story remarks that this could only have been done by a woman. He says, “women brought life but the most important stories speak the real truth that women more often bring death.” Sunuutel, explains to the reader all along why this liberation tale could only be the product of wild, Black femaleness. He says, “if she had been male, she would have controlled her anger, channeled it into righting the world’s wrongs and probably not have grown troublesome wings” (226). *The Book of Phoenix* ends with Suunutel reciting words from Ronald Barthes’ “The Death of the Author.” The quote

confirms that wild Black femaleness is instinctual, organic and normal: “This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings and her delicious sensibility” (227).

From the rich inner world of Okorafor, we are given evidence that enables us to discern that the caricature of the self-sacrificing phallogentric Race Woman is a lie. Real life examples of Black women who lived revolutionary lives according to the guide of their own unique internal compasses abound. As Lindow mentions, Phoenix embarks upon a journey fraught with danger but discovers herself and her purpose while undertaking it. Using the trauma of her imprisoned student, Okorafor reconstructs the myth of imprisoned Africans so that freedom is attained through total annihilation of the corrupt system. This freedom is granted through the reconstructed Race Woman trope of Phoenix. Phoenix’s reconstruction does the biomythographical work of changing the narrative of the Black leader. We see Phoenix in every famous non-traditional Black woman who refuses to shrink herself or dim her light. We see her in those women who stood tall and firm and unapologetic in their full selfhood. We see her in those women who refuse to follow the commonly accepted script and instead write their own. Phoenix is Serena Williams. Audre Lorde is a Phoenix. The Race Woman trope is the lie, the Phoenix is the reality.

Phoenix is the latest installation of the artistic expression of wild Black femaleness in all its brilliant glory. She is the most recent landmark on the path that Alice Walker says in “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1974) began with Phillis Wheatley whose words are “her mother’s signature made clear” (9). This is a path forged by Black

women writers who tell “these stories, which came from [their] mother’s lips as naturally as breathing” (7). Phoenix is the totality—the Blackness, the sexuality, the feral nature and the complete autonomy—that the Mammy, Breeder and Mule tropes attempted to suppress. As the completely self-defined and self-motivated Black woman, Phoenix’s radical reimagining is the newest and most thorough representation of Lorde’s building of what Elizabeth Alexander in “Coming Out Blackened and Whole” (1994) refers to as “a physical space for [Black women] in a hybrid language, a composite, a creation of new language” (219) through the invention of biomythography. The space of biomythography allows for the full expression of all the facets of Black womanhood by assuming “a depth and complexity of identity construction that refutes a history of limitation” (219). Lorde was following the trajectory began by the unapologetically Black woman centered works of Zora Neale Hurston. In *Zami*, she made her mark by not only speaking in her own complex voice, but also naming and claiming the creative aspects of that voice – as biographical and mythological at once. Lorde’s carving out of this space gives multifaceted Black women writers a place to put their thoughts. In this space, “the body of flesh or land that does not exist in white American eyes leaves the inhabitant open for self-invention and interpretation” (220). From this liberating perspective of self-invention, Black women reconstruct the identities that have been imposed upon them and create narratives that portray the collage that is their rich inner world. This collage encourages readers to imagine new, more inclusive paradigms. And the work of biomythography begins anew.

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