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The "Stamp" of Black Science Fiction in the Works of Octavia Butler, and the White SF of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* / 

by 

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Abstract

Among other things, science fiction is a tool for imagining futures. SF authors take what they currently understand about science, couple it with their understanding of human nature, and spin stories that inform, encourage, or warn us about what might be possible. In this sense SF functions in a role adjacent to scientific inquiry, acting as a mouthpiece for the potential revealed or made accessible by developing technology. What can sometimes go unsaid in conversations about SF is that science fiction, like science itself, does not exist in a vacuum removed from cultural scripts and problems. When written by white authors who by definition are limited in their perception or and ability to recognize textual racism, SF runs the risk of falling prey to conceits of impartiality and cultural objectivity--to assume that it's written by, for, and about a supposed universal audience, and conveys universal meanings.

Scholars of SF have a responsibility to tease out racial power dynamics in the genre. If this seems an onerous demand, I suggest referring to the litany of sins white science has performed under the veil of impartiality or proto-colorblindness. Anti-racism is not something that occurs organically, instinctively, or even as an inevitable result of education or a conscious desire to avoid or combat racism. Diligent effort and tireless, consistent critique--of authors, scholars, and even readers--are necessary to avoid mindlessly regurgitating the lessons absorbed from the hegemony of whiteness. For critics of SF, this means that we must be vigilant for traces and reflections of white supremacy and anti-blackness in not only each text we encounter, but also the scholarship and discourse surrounding those texts. Considering texts like *Frankenstein* is important because they have laid the foundations of the genre and anticipate many of its racist
underpinnings. Examining the very different presentations of science and race in Octavia Butler's fiction allows us to see how the "stamp" of black SF can undermine that streak of racism and repurpose the genre toward illuminating, not erasing, race, and imagining futures in which science and blackness interact without exploitation or abuse.
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**Introduction**

In this thesis I provide a brief overview of the traditional patterns and tropes white-authored SF applies to black bodies, drawing on the history of what I term "white science" to explain how the historical intersections of race and technology have informed expressions of race in SF. Having established that theoretical context, I move onto a close examination of the works of Octavia Butler, a prominent black SF author whose work embodies the best qualities of black SF, followed by a contrasting look at Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as an example of how white science fiction authors sometimes fail to overcome their race privilege enough to present characters of color as fully realized human beings.

While white SF cannot be said to have ignored the racial Other, its engagements with race come from the intersections of several layers of privilege; most SF writers were white, educated males who wrote white, educated male characters. The historically problematic relationship white SF has with race is especially disappointing when we consider how extensively SF engages with the concept of the Other; by its imaginative nature, the genre seems to invite empathy and thinking beyond one's personal experience. When it comes to race, however, most white SF writers haven't extended imaginations very far at all. In her essay on the prominent black SF author Samuel Delaney, Sandra Govan observes that "When confronted with science fiction's record, the most ardent student of the genre must admit that in this form black people are most conspicuous by their absence" (Govan 43), and while Govan dutifully lists the scant handful of novels
with prominent black characters (Govan 44), she summarizes the racial landscape of SF by stating that "Black people are not a significant part of any parallel world or possible future that extrapolative literature projects" (Govan 44). Writing about the links between SF and race, Edward James summarizes the often contradictory approaches white SF authors have towards race, noting that while "we might expect science fiction writers to reflect racial prejudice to some extent by science; we might also expect that as science fiction writers they may be using their fiction to educate their readers in the current state of scientific opinion—although that itself, of course, is often the product of current political and social realities" (27).

This emphasis on science and SF as social constructs susceptible to racial bias permeates the discussion of race and SF in large part because when race does become visible, explicitly or by proxy, in the SF of white authors, it's often charged with troubling misrepresentations and dangerous stereotypes. James tracks the history of the Other in American SF, observing that the fictional Other has mutated to match the white social tensions of a given era, noting that, for example, "in the later sixties and seventies the alien, in particular, became the oppressed colonial (and Vietnam Wars devastated planet after planet)” (44). Nonhumans, whether alien or robot or something else entirely, play out the complex dance of race relations according to the anxieties and needs of white America, taking in turn the role of the threatening conqueror as Bug-Eyed-Meanies to be resisted and destroyed (Heinlein’s Starship Troopers is a single but by no means lonely example), the creations of white science whose emerging humanity demands answers (Asimov’s I, Robot collection), or helpless and dehumanized victims of a rapacious (white) humanity (recently, James Cameron’s Avatar). Summarizing the relationship of
SF to race, Benjamin Lawson writes, "the presence of unhuman races and robots make ‘the differences between human races seem appropriately trivial.’ On the other hand, much science fiction was racist and preoccupied with race, either overtly or in the guise of confrontations with aliens and Others of various stripes and hues" (Lawson 88).

This “preoccupation” is rooted in the white author, writing for the white reader, about the racial Other, an objectification in which bodies of color are presented as infinitely malleable and subject to white interpretation without the correcting presence of authors of color. Black bodies in white SF often serve as a canvas upon which white racial imaginings are inscribed, overtly or covertly, in what Toni Morrison calls "the thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy—an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element" (Morrison 1009) in literature written by white writers. Writing about the neglected role of black characters and signifiers in the American canon, Morrison tells us that "Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of their presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness" (Morrison 1006). So too, in the canon of SF, is the black body a crucial presence needed to serve as a mirror for white identity and white anxieties about race. It's this assumption that that is what bodies of color are for, that their purpose is to serve as a canvas upon which white authors project white racial problems as a form of cultural therapy, that defines what I call "white SF," a subtype of science fiction as a genre distinguished by its treatment of people of color as a resource to work out white racial anxieties at the expense of the represented humanity of racial minorities.
"Black SF" confronts white SF by placing the racial Other as the subject, not the object, of SF narratives.

In the SF of white authors bodies of color and especially black bodies are traditionally made into a medium upon which are inscribed contemporary white racial fears and anxieties. By dehumanizing the racialized Other into a mirror that reflects back the concerns of white people regarding race relations, many white authors of SF participate in and perpetuate a legacy of appropriating black bodies for purposes serving white needs and agendas, a legacy with links to the relationship of white science to black bodies that informs how white authors write about the intersections of science, literature, and bodies of color. SF authors of color intervene and work to disrupt this legacy of appropriating black bodies by a process of literary re-appropriation through which they, by writing from lived experience in contexts of marginalized identity, reclaim black bodies to imagine futures, possibilities, and political maneuvers that implicitly or explicitly illuminate and/or challenge racial oppression of the past, present, and future. "Black SF" is inherently political because it defies the historical roles of black people as both literary and scientific objects and subjects, rather than authors or actors, and looks towards futures where science and its rewards are available to or created by people of color, instead of being made possible by the use of black bodies as a resource for white science. Considering the history of the degradations white scientific practices have inflicted and continue to inflict upon black bodies, and how institutional oppression in the form of media normalizes the racism that makes such atrocities possible, Black SF can be seen as a survival strategy, a tool to help understand the part white science plays in larger systems of racism, navigate the current racist manifestations of science, and imagine
futures in which science and technology are resources that gainfully interact with black minds and bodies instead of feeding on them to the benefit of whiteness.

In "George S. Schuyler and the Fate of Early African-American Science Fiction," Benjamin Lawson directs readers toward the works of George Schuyler, one of the earliest published black SF authors, whose novels break with the traditional erasure of black characters by making race a plot point; in *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940* (1931), Schuyler’s protagonist lives in a world where science has produced the option of “becoming white,” and his *Black Empire* (published in serial form 1937-1938) makes racial conflict overt and military, with white and black nations openly warring. These bold, direct references to racial politics in the U.S. stood in sharp contrast to the insidious representations of people of color as monster/alien/experiment found in white SF (See for example the barbaric, futuristic mutants of Wells' *Time Machine* [1895] or Ray Bradbury's uncanny Martians [*The Martian Chronicles*, (1950)]) in large part because they infused black characters with awareness of racial politics grounded in the experience of blackness, as well as the agency to perform on the political stage rather than to serve merely as motivations for white protagonists to act out shadowplay versions of white racial concerns.

Schuyler’s importance ties into not only his obvious inclusion of racial struggles but also the tone of his works. Into a genre where “Black language, including colloquial usages, seemed to have as little place as black ideology” (Lawson 90), Schuyler inserted works “full of allusions to contemporary life and traditions of black literature. Schuyler was not taking lightly the responsibilities of the black novelist by amusing himself with a
white form which could communicate only ‘white’ meanings. He was not used by the science fiction format: he put his stamp on it for his own ends” (Lawson 94). If we accept that literature, like everything else in Western society, exists within the hegemonic environment of white supremacy and privilege, then the default "stamp" put on all bodies of color is that of inferiority, subordination, and denigration, a stamp that reduces the forms of some human beings to a resource that exists to serve the needs of white people. I am adopting Lawson's term of the "stamp" he finds in Schuler's novels, and expanding it to what I call the "stamp of black SF," an identifying marker that can take many forms but indicates a resistance to white supremacy grounded in the experience of an author of color, and works, to paraphrase Lawson, towards black ends while conveying black meanings and, I argue, imagining black futures. The stamp of black SF ties into the tradition of “testifying,” by which black writers such write or speak as a personal/political act.

In her preface to Speaking Power, Doveanna Fulton describes testifying as “reveal[ing] resistance to structures of domination that permeate our lives and how these structures impact people of color. At the same time, testifying presents a paradigmatic critical theory that is relevant to all struggles for social justice” (xii). In this framework, the act of writing about race relations from the subject position of a person of color in the U.S. both illuminates and augments efforts to disrupt an oppressive status quo. Like Lawson, Fulton stresses the importance of authors writing in a way that is “grounded in African American cultural practices,” which she sees as “political in nature and life affirming in substance” (xii).
It isn’t enough, these scholars claim, for people of color to be writing at all. By writing in a way that includes the speech and traditions that are the backdrop to their daily lives—by adding the black stamp of SF to their work—black authors shift the literary discourse of SF by giving a segment of the Othered a say in the conversation, and unapologetically assert the validity of black vernacular by inserting it into narratives concerned with technology and the future. The stamp of black SF pushes against the genre conventions of white SF, resisting the erasure and stereotypical representations of people of color in the genre and working to expand SF into a more inclusive form that humanizes people of all backgrounds and demographics. The tension produced when black SF interrupts the hegemony of whiteness in SF invites attention to the foundational definitions of science fiction, and how black SF challenges or threatens them.

The genre boundaries of SF are notoriously hard to pin down. Reviewing several competing definitions, Brooks Landon settles on the following: “Science fiction is the literature that considers the impact of science and technology on humanity” (31), a tidy description that captures much of what is generally considered SF under its umbrella, but one with little sociological introspection. Landon’s definition, perhaps optimistically, assumes a universal “humanity” to which science and technology can be imagined to have a similar “impact.” More insightfully but still limited, SF author and editor James Gunn touches on “discontinuity” as a possible defining feature of SF. “Traditional fiction,” James writes, “is the literature of continuity...continuous with everyday experience, and the decisions that must be made by the characters are decisions based upon prior experience” (8). In contrast, according to Gunn, “The moment characters in any kind of fiction encounter new situations or attempt new solutions”—when the story
becomes discontinuous or enters into discontinuity—"to traditional situations, the story begins to feel like science fiction" (8). Notice Gunn’s generalized word choices. If traditional fiction is "continuous with everyday experience," it begs the question of whose experience is serving as the baseline, whose "prior experience" is the standard against which "discontinuity" can be said to deviate. And in fact, since science fiction is enmeshed with and emerges from not just cultural understandings of, hopes for, and anxieties associated with science, but specifically white understandings, hopes, and anxieties, there is a central "discontinuity" between the reality or experience of SF, and science itself, for white and black readers and writers. I argue that just as SF as a genre can be defined in part by its discontinuity from ordinary fiction, so can black SF be defined partially (though not exhaustively) by the discontinuities between the contexts of black and white SF authors as they relate to science and SF.

We can link the concept of discontinuity with Stanley Fisher’s sociological construct of the "interpretive community." Fisher argues that groups with different sets of experiences, expectations, needs and positionalities experience the world differently, that they in effect speak different languages regarding the "same" topics. If James Gunn is correct in locating discontinuity as an element near the heart of SF—and I believe he is—the vast differences between how Western science has interacted with black and white communities can be said to have produced distinct interpretive communities for black and white readers and authors. Each community sees the genre according to the perspective of its particular community, and the definitions either holds of the genre would be discontinuous or unintelligible to the other community. With the notions of discontinuous communities in mind, we can begin to explain why science fiction might have seemed
unapproachable or inappropriate to black writers. To potential white readers, science has historically been a tool, a resource, a key to unlocking the future and gaining mastery over the world. That virtually all protagonists of SF were white was implied and could go unsaid, an aspect of white privilege that made the genre inherently welcoming—that is to say, not inherently hostile—to white readers. To potential readers of color, and black people specifically, white science was associated with justifications of racism and racial violence against black communities and individuals, and white SF, with its dearth of thoughtful, humanized characters of color, issued subtle or less subtle markers that SF's keys to the future were being offered to white readers. The entrance of black SF authors disrupted the passive reproduction of shallow racial caricatures that previously dominated the genre, and the texts produced by some black SF authors bear the identifying marks of their resistance to white supremacy in the form of the "stamp" of black SF. In addition, black SF works to recognize the history of white science and its effects on black bodies and minds.

In the context of this thesis I define white science as scientific research, experimentation, and developments performed by white people that progresses at the direct expense of the health, wealth, freedom, or quality of life of people of color. Not all science done by a white person is white science, just as not all white authors of SF produce white SF. Because the ways in which white, Western science has exploited black bodies for its own benefit or actively supported the oppression of people of color is a topic far too vast for this project, I'll restrict the historical information to three telling examples that reflect racial values present in white SF: the Tuskegee syphilis study, the legacy of Henrietta Lacks, and the life of the Sarah Baartman, the so-called "Venus
Hottentot.” My aim with these brief descriptions is to establish the discourse around race and science that emerges in very different forms and working towards different racially significant ends in the SF of Octavia Butler and Mary Shelley.

The Tuskegee Study was performed by the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) and ran from 1932-1972, involving 399 men who had been diagnosed with syphilis as well as an additional 201 uninfected men used as a control group (Jones 1). All of the subjects were black, a fact that the PHS later insisted was not a factor in their selection (Jones 12). The subjects were provided with basic amenities—“free physical examinations, free rides to and from the clinics, hot meals on examination days, free treatment for minor ailments, and a guarantee that burial stipends would be paid to their survivors”—and were “mostly poor and illiterate” (Jones 4), from demographics with limited access to outside medical resources and in desperate need of the offered incentives. Rather than treat the infected subjects, the white medical personnel running the experiment allowed the patients’ disease to develop uninhibited to study the human body in the various final stages of the disease’s progression. Over the course of the experiment, hundreds of men died; even after the advent of penicillin, which revolutionized the treatment of syphilis, the PHS declined to treat the subjects (Jones 8). In “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study,” Allan Brandt contextualizes the state of the medical community’s views on race at the time of the Tuskegee study, explaining that social Darwinism offered a convenient scientific foundation for traditional racism. Medical “facts” such as that “freedom had caused the mental, moral, and physical deterioration of the black population” and that “the ‘gray matter of the negro brain’ [had] to be at least a thousand years behind that of the white races” (21) permitted white doctors to "generally
discount socio-economic explanations of the state of black health, arguing that better medical care could not alter the evolutionary scheme" (22). While the physicians involved published numerous papers on the study’s findings over the course of its tenure, with the appropriate academic or professional gains, their patients not only sickened and died but presumably spread syphilis throughout their communities unknowingly, as direct an example of white exploitation of black bodies as one is likely to find outside of overt slavery. As Brandt concludes, the entire operation was facilitated by an understanding of race that categorized the so-called “white races” as the actual humans, with the black patients as a nonhuman substitute suitable to study pertaining to a disease that also happened to threaten whites: “There can be little doubt that the Tuskegee researchers regarded their subjects as less than human. As a result, the ethical canons of experimenting on human subjects were completely disre-garded” (Brandt 27).

Similar in nature if smaller in scope and subtler in its violation, the case of Henrietta Lacks offers a second glimpse into the relationship of white science to black bodies. Henrietta Lacks died of cervical cancer in 1951 (Skloot 4), but not before "contributing" cells that have enabled incredible medical breakthroughs. Unlike normal human cells, what R.S. calls Henrietta’s “immortal” cancer cells in her recent book have the ability to survive and reproduce outside the human body, making them ideal for study and experimentation, and they quickly became a vital resource for doctors and biologists. The cells, called HeLa in reference to Henrietta, have traveled widely and contributed to several notable medical miracles, which Rebecca Skloot summarizes:

Her cells were part of research into the genes that cause cancer and those that suppress it; they develop drugs for treating herpes, leukemia, influenza,
hemophilia, and Parkinson's disease; and they've been used to study lactose
digestion, sexually transmitted diseases, appendicitis, human longevity, mosquito
mating, and the negative cellular effects of working in sewers. Their
chromosomes and proteins have been studied with such detail and precision that
scientists know their every quick. Like guinea pigs and mice, Henrietta's cells
have become the standard laboratory workhorse. (emphasis mine) (Skloot 4)
The accomplishments made possible by Henrietta's cells are undeniably impressive, but
there is of course a problem, as Skloot's words imply. The HeLa cells, "standard
laboratory workhorse" that they are, were taken without Henrietta Lacks' knowledge or
consent. Unlike the patients in the Tuskegee study, Henrietta received treatment, but she
was similarly kept ignorant of what exactly was being done to her body by white
scientists and physicians, as were her descendants, who suffered considerable distress
upon being informed years after her death that Henrietta's cells were alive (Skloot 181)
and who were themselves studied by researchers who were less than forthright in
informing the family of what they were being studied for (Skloot 6).

*The Immortal Life* is valuable for the light it sheds on the history of Henrietta's
cells, but I find myself suspicious of Skloot, who betrays herself as early as the prologue
by describing her journey sorting through conversations with professors, a decade-long
series of interviews and sundry research with a few too many "I" statements that move
the focus from Henrietta to Skloot herself. Describing her relationship with Deborah,
Henrietta's daughter, Skloot writes: "We'd form a deep personal bond, and slowly,
without realizing it, I'd become a character in her story, and she in mine" (7). This
tendency of Skloot, a white woman, to weave her own story into a book ostensibly
devoted to shining light on the life of a black woman exploited by white people interested
in her only for their own professional advancement, smacks of appropriation
uncomfortably like that which she tries to illuminate in her own book.

In an FAQ on the book's website, Skloot argues against the role of race in
Henrietta's treatment, saying that "For decades, the story of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa
cells has been held up as 'another Tuskegee,' the story of a racist white scientist who
realized a black woman's cells were valuable, stole them from her, then got rich selling
them—perhaps even withholding treatment for her cancer in order to be sure the cells
would grow. But none of that is true," adding that Henrietta was given "the standard
cervical cancer treatment for the day" and pointing out that the doctor who first
discovered HeLa's remarkable attributes never benefitted financially from the cells
(Skloot "F&Q"). Skloot's addendum aside, there remain obvious racial ramifications in
the fact that HeLa has been transported, reproduced, dissected, and subjected to countless
procedures which Henrietta Lacks never consented to in a disturbing parallel to the
transatlantic slave trade.

In "Feminist Intersections in Science: Race, Gender and Sexuality through the
Microscope," Lisa H. Weasel approaches the HeLa cells as a feminist and biologist,
tackling the troubling racial politics involved in the push to have Henrietta's cells
categorized as not only inhuman but "less evolved" than the cells of a human being
(Weasel 189), and critiques notions of scientific impartiality by pointing to how
discussion of Henrietta's cells is tainted with racist myths of black, female, predatory
sexuality, how "the unbridled, infectious sexuality of a black woman from Baltimore"
(190) finds its way into the supposedly apolitical environment of the laboratory.
No conversation about the relationship of white science to race would be complete without mentioning Sarah Baartman, the so-called "Hottentot Venus," whose story encapsulates the methods by which white medicine dehumanized, exotified, and comprehensively Othered black bodies both for material gain and as instruments of racist ideology. Sarah Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman from South Africa, whose surname means "savage servant" (Crais and Scully 9) is a figure largely lost to history, despite the effort of recent biographers, most notably Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully in Sarah Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: a Ghost Story and a Biography, to piece together signs of the woman behind the Hottentot's legend. To the white public of Europe in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Hottentot Venus was a "paradoxical freak of race and sexuality, both alluring and primitive, the very embodiment of desire and the importance of conquering the instincts" (Crais and Scully 1). A black woman with a famously large buttocks and (rumor had it) labia, the Hottentot Venus was created as "the living missing link separating beast from man," and she "entered Europe's psyche, modernity's psyche, not as a woman, a living, breathing person with emotions and memories and longings, but as a metaphor, a figment, a person reduced to a simulacrum" (Crais and Scully 6). Carted about Europe as a sideshow attraction with a pseudoscientific veneer under conditions of dubious legality, she was the ostensible living "evidence" of racial difference and the savage inferiority of blackness and the Hottentot "was entombed in science and figured ever more prominently in the Western imagining of women, race, and sexuality" (Crais and Scully2), and Crais and Scully note that "Many believed the Hottentot Venus was more ape than human, or that she represented a fifth category of human, a Homo sapiens monstrous, a kind of Frankenstein's monster" (2). In the late eighteen hundreds/early
nineteen hundreds, such views were wholly repugnant; that they eerily predict the views of scientists studying the HeLa cells, as Lisa Weasel discusses, is a frightening example of the longevity of racism's impact on science and how deeply it is embedded into white consciousness. Crais and Scully trace the influence of the Hottentot Venus through her exhibitions and the far-reaching expanse of art, literature, and science; while the woman herself was allowed to leave behind "mere fragments of history" (5), the Hottentot Venus, creation of white science, reaches across centuries.

The Tuskegee syphilis trials, the treatment of the cells of Henrietta Lacks, and the racist legend built around Sarah Baartman illustrate patterns within white science that establish black bodies as objects to be studied, manipulated, and consumed for the benefit of white people. In this paradigm black bodies are defined as existing for the use of white science and denied independent agency. Simultaneously, white science uses its interactions with black bodies to create justifications to define black bodies as inferior, even inhuman, thereby allowing the immoral treatment of black bodies to continue. Even in the rare cases that white writers take the time and energy to leverage their privilege on behalf of black people oppressed by white science, they tend to prove unable to resist re-centering themselves as the subjects of discourse, and only further entrench racial hierarchies by making stories about black victims actually about themselves.

The three examples I touched on are only a few prominent examples of the abuse white science has heaped onto black bodies, but they convey the attitudes and context which form the background of white SF. White SF erases black people from its imagined futures, sending the message that the future is made for and occupied by white people. When black characters are included, they often fall into racial stereotypes, or are twisted
into new shapes to accommodate the needs of the white audience, becoming aliens, robots, and monsters as needed. The warping of black bodies in literature is inextricable from the mistreatments administered by white science, and we can find reflections of these same attitudes in the works of white authors.

Few authors are as relevant to discussions of black bodies in SF than Octavia Butler (1947-2006), famously known as the first black woman to make a living writing science fiction. Primarily a novelist, Butler was the author of the five-book *Patternist* series (published between 1976-1987), the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1987-1989), the *Parable* duology (1994-1999), and two stand-alone novels, *Fledgling* (2005) and *Kindred* (1979), as well as a small body of short fiction collected in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1996). Her fiction used such devices as aliens, diseases, time-travel, and telepathy to speak insightfully and insistently about technology, the importance of remembering history, and the need for empathy in this or any world.

Octavia Butler once described herself as "comfortably asocial--a hermit in the middle of Seattle--a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive" (qtd. in "About the Author," *Parable of the Talents*). After her death, Gregory Hampton summarized her path to authorship as follows: "Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California, on June 22, 1947. Butler was raised primarily by her mother, as her father died when she was very young. To escape the boredom of poverty, Butler began writing at the age of 10. Despite her dyslexia, by the time she was 12, she had become an avid reader of science fiction. After seeing a science fiction film entitled *Devil Girl from Mars*, Butler decided to begin producing science fiction that did not ignore issues of race
and gender. She studied at Pasadena City College, California State University, and
UCLA, and participated in the Open Door Program of Screen Writers' Guild of America,
West (1969–70), and the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop in 1970" (Hampton
246). Octavia Butler died at the age of 58 after a fall at her Seattle home in February of
2006. As a black woman growing up in poverty who made a deliberate choice to engage
race in her fiction, and the first black woman to make a living doing so, Butler is perhaps
an obvious choice for a project on race and science in SF.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851), by contrast, would seem hardly relevant to the
discussion. Unlike Butler, whose childhood reading was composed in large part from
secondhand books and magazines brought home by her mother, who worked as a
housekeeper, Shelley, the child of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, has been
called a "literary heiress" (Gilbert and Gubar 227) and grew up with an extremely
thorough education that continued to develop after she fell in love with, and eventually
married, Percy Shelley (1792-1822). While Shelley as a woman lacked privileges held by
men of her time--for example, few believes she wrote *Frankenstein*, many assigning the
accomplishment, or at least its quality, to Percy--Shelley's greatest tragedies were
personal rather than resulting from institutional oppression: her mother died shortly after
childbirth, and Shelley herself suffered through several miscarriages, as well as living
through dire financial straits in her life with Percy Shelley (Hunter 333). Shelley's fiction
does occasionally engage with race, and those interactions are influenced by her largely
unexamined white privilege, which seeps into her most widely-known text, the SF novel
*Frankenstein* (1818). Shelley is often credited with founding SF, and *Frankenstein* is one
of the genre's earliest canonical texts. The foundational nature of both author and novel,
as well as the specific ways in which *Frankenstein* relates to race and science, make *Frankenstein* an ideal example of white SF from which to build a template for understanding the problems embedded in the genre.

In the next chapter I focus on Octavia Butler's body of work, which fights the disappearance and misrepresentation of blackness in white SF by engaging with SF concepts from the position of a black woman in the modern-day U.S. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, Butler's novels and short stories take a slew of SF conventions that often ignore or problematically manhandle people of color and reorient them to address black histories, current concerns, and future possibilities. In Chapter 2 I address Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as an example of canonical, foundational SF that displays many of the markers of white SF.
Chapter 1: "What Good is Science Fiction to Black People?": The Black "Stamp" of Butler's SF

Keenly aware of her unique status as a black woman with a successful career in the SF genre, Octavia Butler consistently stressed the value for black SF as a tool for navigating the realities of racism and to counter the often racially dehumanizing effects of white SF. Butler reported criticism leveled at her from black communities, questions rooted in a utilitarian perspective that at first glance saw SF as at best a luxury and at worst a distraction from practical pursuits. To these critics Butler said,

Still I'm asked, what good is science fiction to Black people? What good is any form of literature to Black people? What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what 'everyone' is saying, going, thinking - whoever 'everyone' happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people? ("Positive Obsession" 134-35).

Butler's defense of SF's relevance to black communities establishes a set of priorities that underlie her body of work. Her novels and short fiction consistently present worlds seen through the perspective of characters of color, and the struggles her protagonists engage in are informed by Butler's experience living as a woman of color in a society that privileges whiteness. The emphasis she places on writing "off the beaten track" resonates with the understanding that the beaten track in SF is inextricably connected to the history
of white science and white science fiction, both of which turn black bodies into objects to suit the needs of white scientists or white authors.

At a superficial level, Butler's fiction is distinct from much of the SF that came before her in its sociological realism, which is grounded in the knowledge that science isn't an objective tool that produces an impersonal "progress." There are no science-enabled utopias or power fantasies in her work: her stories are remarkable in part for the ways in which they portray people compromised not only by science fictional mechanisms—telepathy, terrifying diseases, alien coercion—but also by their fellow human beings. Butler is too historically and sociologically savvy, too much a student of human interaction and guided by the lived experience of a woman of color, to imagine a Star Trek-esque unified humanity; neither does she offer a simple, Heinlienian antagonist to be defeated by starships and ray guns. The enemy in Butler is often human nature misdirected by dangerous and oppressive social scripts.

Butler saw clearly the value of black SF but was aware of the reasons so few authors of color entered the genre. Commenting on her lifelong obsession with the genre, Butler said, "Writers come from readers, and for a long time there simply weren't that many black SF readers. I got used to reading books in which everyone was white, but a lot of blacks didn't......It never occurred to me to ask, If no one else is doing it, do I dare do it? But I realize that a lot of people think if there's no model, then maybe there's some reason not to do something" (qtd. in McCaffery 17).1

The lack of model that Butler references is certainly one explanation for why she had so few predecessors, as are the financial and educational disparities between black and white potential authors, and industry glass ceilings that make it progressively more
difficult for black professionals to rise in the ranks of any organization. As if these barriers weren't enough, the "discontinuous" relationship between blackness and science, a relationship founded on white violence against black bodies for the benefit of white people, made for a painful cultural memory to draw upon and write from, but that's exactly what Butler did. Following the tradition of testifying, Butler made her writing political and racially empowering by infusing her fiction with a black racial identity that addressed science in three major ways: 1) It is aware of the predations of white science, and works to honor black victims and keep those memories alive without reducing victims to dehumanized objects of pity; 2) it cautions readers about current threats of white science to people of color, reminding the audience that racially-driven misuse of science is not just a thing of the past; and 3) it breaks away from centering whiteness in discussions of science by imagining futures in which blackness intersects with technology from a position of agency. What follows is a breakdown of Butler's novels according to these three categories.

Perhaps Octavia Butler's most widely-taught novel and the one that deals most directly and persistently with the issue of slavery, *Kindred* tells the story of Edana (Dana) Franklin, a black woman living in Pasadena in 1976 who is forced by an unexplained mechanism to travel back and forth through time to the era of U.S. slavery, being periodically returned under similarly mysterious circumstances. While time travel is old hat in SF, Butler breaks the mold of detached observers jaunting through the timestream to objectively document history or embark on elective adventures by creating an intimate, viscerally real exploration of the bodily reality of a slave's existence. As if being forced to experience life as a slave in the antebellum South wasn't abuse enough, Dana is unable
to control her present to past: her passage through time is controlled by her master's will, and she eventually realizes that she travels to the past only when the white Rufus Weylin believes himself to be in mortal danger, a bond broken only by the death of Rufus at the novel's end.

The arbitrariness of this fantastic device reinforces the arbitrariness of the racial logic that supports slavery, and the absurdity of Butler's fantasy is discussed by Jennifer Henton, who examines the connections connection between SF, history, and race, by arguing that while “black authors often ‘introduce history into genres that are often thought to be ahistorical,’” Nonetheless, Henton argues that “Science fiction is never ahistorical” (104). Henton accurately observes that in *Kindred*, “Dana literally becomes primitively bound and enslaved by a psychosomatic-like device that moves her to remember the miseries of slavery” (107). Henton goes on to note that because Dana's movement through time (the origins of which Butler never explains) is caused by an untouchable, unquestionable authority, Butler uses Dana's situation to reflect the limitations placed on the movement of slaves: “Butler enables readers to see the striking difference between travel for black women in the twentieth century and in the antebellum South” (Henton 107). If we draw from Henton's analysis of *Kindred*, we can see the ways in which Butler uses Dana's dangerous, uncontrollable time travel to disrupt a trope of white SF in which technology is wielded by and for the white protagonist (see chapter 2 for a discussion of *Frankenstein* in this context). In stark contrast to the white idea of science fiction as presenting technology as an empowering force fast approaching delightful realization, Butler applies a black stamp to SF by designing an SF phenomenon in which the "technology" of time travel is an indicator and enabler of slavery, and in
which its possession is used to mark the privileged from the oppressed. Rather than empowering Dana, it’s the end of the book and Rufus's death, or what Henton calls “The impossibility of time travel [that] frees Dana—a striking refutation of time travel as techno-advancement” (Henton 108). Dana survives her contact with time travel, but at severe costs to her body and psyche, showing that the pseudoscientific power of time travel is, in this case and through the eyes of a black woman, a force that maintains the historical status quo of slavery and its legacy. This repositioning of technology as a tool of oppression is a powerful example of Butler's reappropriating of black bodies and repositioning of science as it might be perceived by people of color.

In examining Kindred it's helpful to invoke the concept of the postmodern slave narrative. As defined by Timothy Spaulding, postmodern slave narratives are works “that reject the boundaries of narrative realism in their retelling of slavery,” whose authors, “As a part of a larger tradition that sets out to recover the stories of our past obscured by time and by an official historical record that devalued the perspectives of the slaves themselves... sought not only to recover these stories but also to redefine the way we narrate the slave experience” (Spaulding 1-2). Placing Butler in the context of such authors as Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Samuel Delaney, and Jewelle Gomez, Spaulding argues that “Butler’s novel emphasizes the physical and psychological links between slavery and contemporary American life. Dana’s body and her ancestral ties act as physical sites of the past that she must confront in order to free herself from slavery and its legacy” (Spaulding 26). The fact that Dana the character, and not (as in much of white postmodern fiction) a nameless or emotionally uninvested narrator, travels through time, is of particular interest to Spaulding, who claims that because of this
distinction, *Kindred* "emphasizes the ideological foundations of American slavery that persist through time and cannot be isolated in one historical moment" (Spaulding 27). Looking at the novel through Spaulding’s lens, we can understand *Kindred* as a text that works to break down the tendency to dismiss the horrors of the past and, by association, deny their effects on the present. Dana’s time travel can be seen not as unique but universal, a temporal bilocation that defines the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the modern U.S. The suffering Dana experiences living as a literal slave, up to and including the dismemberment she suffers upon her final return to the present, can be viewed as a representation of modern people of color living through the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, with the ultimate message being that no one who "survived" slavery, literally or figuratively, can emerge unscathed.

That *Kindred* is rooted in an understanding of slavery that defies easy temporal placement is supported by Butler's statements. Marisa Parham cites an interview with Butler in which the novelist claimed that *Kindred* was sparked in part by a conversation in her youth with a young black man who resented older generations of black men and women who he felt demeaned themselves, and therefore him, by adopting conciliatory attitudes in regard to racism (Parham 1320). Parham explains that Butler, whose mother worked long hours for employers who treated her with disrespect the young Octavia resented, grew to understand the necessity of such an attitude not only to her ancestor’s survival, but also to her own, remembered the comment and used it as kindling for *Kindred*, in a sense using the novel to also remind African Americans that the realities of slavery and its immediate aftereffects prohibited the kind of revolutions they were currently performing, while laying the groundwork for modern revolutions to succeed.
Parham notes the trauma of such knowledge, noting that Dana's "haunting experience of the past as the present is an experience of pain, horror, and disillusionment, coming at nearly unsustainable cost. It is in this way that that texts like *Kindred*, and neo-slavery narratives more generally...[bring] the historical past into the present tense, thus conjuring histories actualities--flesh, survival, and the things people do in the interest of the future" (Parham 1320-1321).

While Dana is the story's protagonist and most critical attention has been devoted to her, there's something to be said about the implications of what happens to her husband, Kevin, a white man who gets carried along with Dana to the past. Unlike Dana, Kevin is protected from the threat of slavery by his skin color, but Butler performs a subtle transformation on him over the course of the novel that deserves examination. It begins with small, almost innocuous things. First, his initial disbelief of Dana's story subtly implies that she, as a black woman, can't be trusted to tell the truth or report accurately about her own experiences. She replies, "...I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They're no crazier than yours" (*Kindred* 16-17). His disbelief persists, however, and he advises her to deal with her fear that she'll be suddenly snatched away into the past by suggesting that she "Let it go" (*Kindred* 17), a shocking display of white privilege that reveals his inability to connect with her experience, albeit fantastic, of racism. Only when he grabs onto her as she vanishes and rides along to the past does he acknowledge, "It happened...It's real!" (*Kindred* 58), a concession that offers Dana little comfort because she's already begun to be suspicious of the polluting effect slavery might have on him. She thinks, "I didn't want him here. I didn't want this place to touch him except through me. But it was too late for that" (*Kindred* 59). Events prove Dana's fears
well-founded, as circumstances force her to pretend to be Kevin's slave for their mutual protection, and she worries that "If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here" (Kindred 77). While Kevin never transforms into a slave owner, Butler employs the SF trope of time travel in a new way to show that a white man, even one married to a black woman in 1976, a person seemingly free of the overt, interpersonal kind of racism, is still infected with traces of the same whiteness that existed overtly in the slave-owning South of 1815, thereby implicating white readers by suggesting that they too are vulnerable to the insidious effects of white privilege and supremacy, and working to unsettle comfortable notions of modern "post-racism."

By taking the time-honored mechanism of time travel and locating it in reference to a black, female character and historical context, Butler disrupts the illusion that science or SF are harmless or race-neutral, and highlights their racial ramifications, arguing that the science to which science fiction is tied deserves equal racial scrutiny, and that inattention to these aspects can mean overlooking vital or dangerous aspects of race relations. The author continues this trend of reminding her audience that slavery and its legacy is far from dead and buried in her Parable duology, the Lilith's Brood trilogy, and the Seed to Harvest series.

In the Seed to Harvest and Lilith's Brood series, Butler takes examples of contemporary advances in science and projects possible outcomes in which black bodies and minds are threatened by external control of those technologies. Each series is complex and performs many functions, but both can be seen as serving as a warning or cautionary tale about the possibility that current technological developments are just as
capable, in the hands of white science, to turn on black bodies as older technologies have and do.

Writing about the *Lilith's Brood* collection, Butler said that the trilogy was written in response to her interest in the evolving science of bioengineering, explaining that “What scares me is the direction genetic engineering is taking. I don’t mean creating monsters and other terrible things—although that might happen—but the idea that ‘familiarity breeds contempt’” (qtd. in McCaffery 18). Given the examples of white science's disturbing historical "familiarity" breeding, and being engendered by, contempt for black bodies, Butler's concerns are certainly justified, and she teases out the implications of forced genetic experimentation on bodies of color through three protagonists of the trilogy, each of whom narrates a novel. The premise of the trilogy finds the human race on the brink of total annihilation, having almost exterminated itself in a mutually destructive nuclear war. The survivors of the war, themselves dying from injury, radiation, or starvation, are discovered by an alien race, the Oankali, who are driven by a biological impulse to genetically join with new forms of life, an impulse that they follow without regard to the foreign species' consent to the project of integration. Through the actions of the Oankali and their manipulations of the bodies of her black protagonist, Lilith, and her children, Butler addresses the concern that as our ability to alter human genes increases, the racial and financial stratification of who controls such technology presents a threat to black people's bodily autonomy.

The forced sterilization of black women by white doctors, often without the women's knowledge, is well-documented (see *Eugenics and Education in America*, by Ann Gibson Winfield), and eugenics, the artificial shaping of the human race according
to assumptions of racial purity or superiority, is among the most intimate and destructive intersections of science and race. That being the case, it's logical that Butler devotes so much time and detail to exploring how black reproductive power can be controlled or its agency compromised by antagonistic science fictional forces embodying realistic projections of current science. With her typical attention to complex and nuanced expressions of political power, Butler refuses to allow the Oankali to settle into either the despotic alien overlord or benevolent mystical space-deity tropes, leaving the reader with an uncomfortable situation in which characters are forced to give birth to children literally of another race, bringing to attention the deeply embedded xenophobic instincts that fuel white fears of miscegenation,2 one of the topics she returns to regularly.

*Lilith's Brood* makes the case for the need of black communities to be aware of unfolding avenues of scientific research because of the dangers they pose in the hands of white science, a case rooted in the history of white science's abuse of black bodies. The trilogy offers readers a world that implicates current trends in genetic engineering—the choice of a child's eye color, gender, disability status, up to a limitless potential of specification and enhancement—with the implied possibility that white science, having been disproven in its assumption of inherent, biological racial differences and hierarchies, might seek to artificially create or impose such distinctions. If genetic engineering were to progress sufficiently, money might buy "improvement," and given the economic stratification of the U.S., opportunities of racial "enhancement" would be disproportionately available to white buyers. A similar warning, geared toward the psychological manipulation enabled by modern information technology, is rendered in her *Seed to Harvest* series.
In an interview, Octavia Butler described the concerns she addresses in the *Seed to Harvest* novels about technology and control:

[Interviewer]: Throughout the Patternist series you have different hierarchies yet the same kinds of control mechanisms we see around us.

[Octavia Butler]: No, they're *worse*, because the mutes don't know what's happening to them. If you know that you've been completely taken over, if you're aware of this happening, you might be able to fight it. But if you don't know about it, you don't have a chance (qtd. in McCaffery 55).

The "mutes" of the series are ordinary humans who over the course of the books become enslaved by the psychic "Patternists," a telepathic society that uses its powers to control the minds of the mutes and create a sort of ultimate slave caste. Made unable to manifest or imagine disobedience, the mutes are targets of casual, widespread abuse, and are tended by the shepherd-esque "muteherds" (*Patternmaster* 660), and Butler employs them as exaggerated examples of the modern person's susceptibility to media and information technology. As the interviewer states, "you go out to buy a Bud Light or a Toyota without being aware that you've been programmed to do it," to which Butler responds, "Exactly. And even if you're aware of these forces, they can still possess or control you because you're not necessarily aware of exactly what they're doing when they're doing it" (qtd. in McCaffery 55).

In addition to acting as an amplified version of advertising and the passive imprinting of social scripts, the telepathic abilities of the Patternists are used by Butler to represent the growing capabilities of long-distance communication, and the corresponding gaps between those empowered by such technologies and those without
access. The Patternists, called such because every member is linked together into the vast Internet-esque Pattern, become the "superior" race in part because they have the mental voice that "verbalizes" and makes apparent their humanity. Although there are Patternists who speak up for the rights of the mutes, with one arguing that "Look, they're people, man. Powerless and without mental voices, but still people" (601), they have little power or influence themselves, and the most they advocate is for their fellow Patternists to refrain from killing the mutes (*Patternmaster* 661). Butler emphasizes the relevance of racism to the voiceless mutes in an earlier novel, *Mind of My Mind*, when the long-lived Anyanwu, the metaphorical mother of the Patternists, confronts Doro, the de facto father/tyrant whose selective breeding program was the true mechanism that created the new race. Both Doro and Anyanwu were born in Africa and have lived through—and past—transatlantic slavery. Hearing Doro use the term "mute," Anyanwu snaps and confronts Doro with the racial hierarchy he's created:

> [Anyanwu]: Mutes!

> He looked annoyed, probably with himself. "It's a convenient term. People without telepathic voices. Ordinary people."

> [Anyanwu]: "I know what it means, Doro. I knew what it meant the first time I heard Mary use it. It means niggers!...and if you don't think they look down on us non-telepaths, us niggers, the whole rest of humanity, you're not paying attention." (*Mind of My Mind* 395)

Anyanwu's fears are, of course, fully justified, and the world that results from the inequalities between Patternist and mute acts as an indictment to a growing separation in our own world between those who have access to electronic media, particularly the
Internet, and those who don't and are "mute" and virtually powerless in electronic discourse.

The *Parable* duology, composed of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, takes place in a postapocalyptic, or perhaps mid-apocalyptic, United States. Like *Kindred*, the *Parable* books make visible Western society's proximity to the legacy of slavery. Where in *Kindred* Butler uses time travel to blur the certainty that slavery is a forgotten remnant buried in an irrelevant past, in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* she goes a step further to remind the reader that the racism that brought it about are extant and only await the opportunity to reemerge, and that modern science is just as willing to be its accomplice as white science of the past. In *Parable of the Sower*, the duology's protagonist, Lauren Olamina, flees the smoldering ruins of her childhood home of Robledo to travel along the highways and country of a collapsing, mid-apocalyptic United States, picking up stragglers and forming a family around the kernel of Earthseed, the religion of which she is the inventor. *Parable of the Talents* takes up where the first novel left off, in the settlement of Acorn, the first Earthseed community, where Lauren had settled down. Earthseed's tenets are more pragmatic philosophy than theology, urging its followers to accept the inevitability of "God as Change," a belief system in part rooted in the tumultuous history of black Americans and fundamentally opposed to the privileged, fundamentalist perspective of the novels' antagonists. The small sect is nonthreatening and as peaceful as reasonably possible in their dangerous world, but when an anti-intellectual, militaristic, and racist Christian denomination sets its sights on the "heretics" at Acorn, the townspeople are powerless to resist.
The *Parable* books show us, with chilling realism, how contemporary U.S. citizens could resurrect the institution of slavery and how modern technology could reinforce the institution. The fact that Olamina and her people suffer an enslavement made possible by the use of "slave collars," devices that administer debilitating electrical shocks on command or in response to violent resistance or attempts at fleeing captivity, resurrects the uneasy shade of white science invading and controlling black bodies. The reappearance of debt slavery in the series, in addition to the more obvious chattel slavery Lauren experiences, is part of what Marlene D. Allen describes as Butler “indict[ing] contemporary corporate practices” by “connect[ing] postmodern capitalism to the plantation system of the past that enslaved African Americans” (Allen 1357). Andrea Hairston echoes Allen and takes the critique of capitalism further, claiming that in the duology Butler "speculates on the implications of late model capitalism" where "the cutthroat, commodity culture values of transnational corporations and patriarchal militarism ravish and rend asunder the human fabric of life," while in contrast, Butler positions the poor majority, "abandoned by a complicit military and an ineffectual democracy...reinvent community in order to rescue the future" (Allen 295). The *Parable* books are near-future dystopias, or worlds leaning over the edge of dystopia, and Butler uses the setting to warn readers about any number of looming threats, from environmental disasters to the dangers of privatizing fire departments and the police force, that are of particular import to communities of color. It's noteworthy that the scientific advances Butler includes in the books are largely available to and utilized by white men with deep pockets against racial minorities struggling to survive: she reminds readers that despite gains made to bridge the gaps between white and black America, the
greatest advances are still disproportionately available to the wealthy and connected, who are in turn disproportionately white.

Although critics like Allen and Hairston make valid points about the economic and gendered nature of the capitalism-gone-wrong in Butler's duology, they pay little attention to its racial implications. Allen explains the dangers of the past “boomerang[ing]” back in a cycle of inevitable repetition unless a “Community-Reliant Individual” who understands the necessity of community and diversity can serve as “an example of how human beings might avoid the consequences of the boomerang of history by adopting the aesthetics of change and adaptability” (1358). Lauren Olamina, the protagonist of the duology, serves as such an individual. Her status as a messianic black woman whose adaptability offers a path to survival anticipates Butler's last novel, *Fledgling* (2005).

Many of Butler's novels deal with possible transformations of the human form, and in *Fledgling*, her final book, she created a world in which black skin, instead of being a marker of social stigma, represents the salvation and evolution of an entire race. The Ina, Butler's science fictional vampires, coexist with humanity in a symbiotic relationship that has spanned the length of both species' existence. In some ways Butler sticks to traditional vampire mythos: the Ina survive on human blood and possess the ability to mesmerize human beings. In other ways the novel breaks forcefully from the vampire novel’s fantasy roots, making the Ina a race much preoccupied with genetics and scientific discovery. The protagonist of *Fledgling*, Shori Matthews, is the first black vampire, genetically engineered to have darker pigmentation as an answer to the Ina's vulnerability to sunlight. The novel opens with Shori amnesiac in the ruins of her
mother’s home, ignorant of her heritage, abilities, or identity, and part of her journey covers the rediscovery of who and what she is. Through Shori Butler breaks not just the SF/fantasy genre barrier, but also the habit of white SF to create futures in which white bodies dominate, and the implicit inevitability of white supremacy extending into the future. In Fledgling, Shori’s black skin is a talisman, a symbol of opportunity and freedom. Because Butler doesn’t write easy answers or racially naive scenarios, the potential represented by Shori’s scientifically-crafted blackness is immediately seen as a threat by many of the universally white Ina, a group of which proves responsible for the destruction of her family home and act as the antagonists of the novel.

Butler’s imagining black skin as a kind of destination, a goal for which to strive for to the exclusion or abandonment of white skin, is an ideologically violent act within the hegemony of whiteness. By positioning Shori as the first in a new race, an artificially-created step up the ladder of evolution, Butler challenges the core tenets of white supremacy that view blackness as deviant from the ideal and normative. In fact, it’s difficult to imagine a more basic disruption of white SF than the possibility of a future in which all white skin—an entire species—is discarded in favor of more advantageous black skin.

The Ina of Fledgling are inhuman, but their reactions to Shori’s dark skin run the gamut of reverence for the possibilities she represents to horror at her scientific origins and visible difference. Informed of Shori’s ability to walk about in daylight while the rest of her people sleep, one Ina woman responds, "'You are a treasure. You would be an asset to any community...I know of several cases where [Shori’s ability] would have saved lives'" (214). Shori’s enemies, the Silk family, view her as an abomination in part because
her dark skin is the result not only of genetic manipulation, but specifically caused by the introduction of human genes into the Ina. The part of Shori that is human—the part Butler codes as her "black" lineage—is seen by the Silks as a pollution into the purity of Ina DNA. Towards the conclusion of the novel the Silks, on trial for the murders of her female relatives, lash out at Shori with rhetoric that closely parallels white supremacist claims. Milo, the Silk patriarch, asserts Shori's inhumanity (or at least, her status as a non-Ina, not a member of their race), claiming that she isn't Ina at all and that she has "no more place at this Council than would a clever dog!" (238). Throughout the trial her credentials as Ina—effectively as a person, something more than an animal—are called into question. "You must seem more Ina than they" (266), she is cautioned, for her accusations, identity, and personhood to be believed, in a manner similar to how black people living in the U.S. are sometimes taught to be more polite and rule-abiding than their white neighbors simply because the police force and legal system are biased against them. Even her emotions are subject to the scrutiny of the white Ina: when one of her human companions is killed in an effort to disrupt the trial, Shori's adherence to Ina etiquette, her efforts to seem more Ina than her enemies, is used as proof of her Otherness, with an opponent stating that if she was a "true" Ina, she "would be prostrate" because "True Ina know the pain of losing a symbiont. We are Ina. You are nothing!" (272).

Butler links the historical white fear of black reproductive powers and so-called miscegenation to the Ina's racist fear that Shori will corrupt their species and "get black, human children from her" (272), which is seen as especially degrading because "such people were kept as property, as slaves" (272). What's particularly interesting about
Butler’s portrayal of the Ina is their supposed lack of racism. As a race distinct from human beings, their official stance on racial bigotry is that it’s a primitive human flaw, one the Ina are immune to or above. One Ina states that "Ina weren't racists...Human racism meant nothing to them because human races meant nothing to them" (148). Like the real-world phenomenon of political "colorblindness," this belief that the white Ina are devoid of racism and can ignore signifiers of race has the dual functions of comforting white people, who don’t have to confront the possibility that they might harbor internalized racist beliefs, and enabling actual racism to go unspoken because white people claim to not "see" race, and therefore supposedly can’t perform racist acts. Butler disturbs the Ina’s colorblindness over the course of the trial, allowing hints of the white Ina’s racism to surface indirectly or in moments of anger. One of the final outbursts from the racist Silk family is a condemnation of Shori’s family’s experimentation. A Silk representative calls on his fellow white Ina to share his belief that "We are not them...Nor should we try to be them. Ever. Not for any reason. Not even to gain the day; the cost is too great" (292). The "cost" he refers to is the loss of whiteness, and because whiteness is incredibly fragile and threatened by any inclusion of the Other, any "taint" of blackness far outweighs material benefits to health or practical assets Shori’s skin portends.

*Fledgling* is Butler’s most ambitiously anti-racist novel because it suggests that blackness might be the ultimate or ideal state for an intelligent species, and it calls out the racism inherent in racial "colorblindness" that conceals racist attitudes that in the real world damage the lives of black people in the U.S..

Throughout her canon Butler answers the question, "What good is science fiction to black people?" by interrogating racial hierarchies from the perspectives of characters
of color. The stamp of her black SF goes beyond breaking the barrier of black visibility in the genre that Sandra Govan described. By making the needs, histories, and struggles of black characters centered, she refuses to the racial conventions of SF limit the exposure and humanity of black characters. The genre devices Butler employs to exaggerate, rephrase, or mirror existing systems of racial oppression are chosen with care to be relevant to actual racial dynamics. In Butler's fiction, time travel isn't just an adventure: it parallels the harm the pervasive and inescapable legacy of slavery inflicts on black bodies today. Projecting the development of modern technologies into the future isn't just an idle thought experiment: it's a vital exercise needed to help avert or avoid a reappearance of the horrors white science has wrought upon black bodies, and an incisive reminder of how white science continues those horrors today. Even a device as potentially unreal or fantastical as the vampire myth, Butler forges into a tool to destabilize illusions of racial colorblindness and post-racism, and to create a black character who embodies a future in which science and blackness are inextricably entwined, a future in which science and the future it makes possible are black.

In the next chapter I compare the rich, humanizing characterization of black characters found in Butler's novels, as well as her attention to black history and threats against black bodies, to the racial presence in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The two authors stand as useful bookends to the genre, Shelley often credited with its inception and Butler having written prolifically until her death in 2005. Two of the most famous female SF writers in history, they are separated by time, class, race, education, and the specific politics they lived through, but especially telling are the differences of racial
visibility and humanity in their work, and the choices each makes regarding how
technology interacts with black bodies, histories, communities, and struggles.
Chapter 2: The Erased Black Mother in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

If Butler's body of work consistently labors to reveal the interactions of race and science by providing vital characters whose race intersects plausibly with the science and society surrounding them, Mary Shelley, like many white authors of SF, suffers a corresponding failure of imagination. In this chapter I examine how Shelley's *Frankenstein* stands in contrast to Butler’s SF through the novel's inability to create racially Othered characters with internal lives, goals, and perspectives that don't orbit the central desire to become white, and how Shelley, by centering that desire, dehumanizes her characters of color and perpetuates beliefs consistent with white supremacy. I chose to include *Frankenstein* as the primary example of white SF in this thesis because as a canonical SF text it foregrounds much later white SF and acts as a template for certain trends in the genre. By studying the flaws Shelley makes in her presentations of race and the connections of those flaws to white science, I aim to provide readers with a tool to help tease out similar problems of misrepresentation in other SF texts.

In addition to being one of the founding texts of the science fiction genre, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has provided fertile ground for analysis and critique from feminist, critical race, and postcolonial theorists due to the attention Shelley devotes to issues of gender, slavery, and imperialism. H.L. Malchow provides scholars with an analysis of Shelley’s choice of descriptions for the Creature in the context of nineteenth-century images of race, arguing that by encoding the Creature with features associated with enslaved Africans, Shelley evokes white British readers’ propaganda-fueled stereotypes of the black body to endow the Creature with its combination of Noble Savage dignity and predatory menace (Malchow 90, 92). Feminist scholars have homed
in on the parent-child bond between Victor and the Creature, often viewing Victor's experiment as an usurpation of "feminine" power, an attempt to replace or render obsolete the traditional role of women as producers of life. In the latter analysis Victor is interpreted as a neglectful single parent, the Creature an abandoned, motherless child, and their ensuing tragedies are the results of upsetting the natural order. I'd like to problematize the feminist perspective by arguing that not only is the Creature not motherless, nor Victor a solitary parent, but also that scholarship predicated on those assumptions contributes in the erasure of black bodies. By examining what I identify as the erased black mother of the Creature, I will interrogate how Shelley's pro-abolition text nevertheless reinforces and perpetuates the Othering of the slaves her Creature is meant to humanize, and how *Frankenstein*'s intersections of technology, race, and empire reinforce notions of black bodies as fuel for the white science and white supremacy found in the Tuskegee trials, the (mis)use of the HeLa cells, and the science-sponsored abuse of Sarah Baartman.

That Shelley drew attention to the abolitionist cause in writing *Frankenstein* has been well-documented, most recently and thoroughly by Debbie Lee in *Slavery & the Romantic Imagination* (2003). Lee links the composition of *Frankenstein* with contemporaneous slave revolts and the discourse of British emancipation debates, even suggesting that the Creature may have been inspired by “The Isle of Devils,” a poem by abolitionist Matthew Gregory Lewis about a “rejected African” that possesses “the sad rejection, the painful ugliness, and the unfulfilled longing” mirrored in Shelley’s Creature (Lee 172-173). While Shelley's novel may have drawn from the question of slavery and in some ways functions as a condemnation of British imperialism, Shelley falls into the
trap of white British condescension in her portrayal of the Creature. In this chapter I address the spaces where Shelley, as a white woman of financial means, substantial education, and institutional privilege, failed to humanize black slaves in her own mind, and how that ignorance taints her portrayal of the Creature, her critique of British imperialism, and the novel's effectiveness as an anti-racist text.

To put it simply, the major critique Shelley makes of English imperialism—embodied by Walton's Arctic explorations and Victor's mad science—is that it harms white people, and the caution passed along by Victor is that the project of empire should slow to reasonable proportions because the alternative is violence against the white feminine space. In "Frankenstein and a Critique of Imperialism," Gayatri Spivak touches on the disappearance of the victims of British imperialism when she argues that in creating the character of the Creature "Shelley had attempted to come to terms with the making of the colonial subject" (Spivak 268) but, "when it comes to the colonial subject's prehistory, Shelley's political imagination fails" (Spivak 269). The Creature's prehistory, to use Spivak's term, is its existence prior to its introduction to the colonizing, assimilation-inducing aura of whiteness, and Spivak is correct: Shelley indeed fails to imagine or at least present that humanizing prehistory to the reader. Using Spivak's insight as a jumping-off point, I will show how the missing prehistory she deplores is distilled in the erased black mother of Frankenstein's Creature.

The erased black mother of Frankenstein exists simultaneously in the text itself, in the form of the unearthed and desecrated bodies from which Victor gathers the raw materials necessary to construct his creation, and in the scholarship which appropriates the violation of those bodies as a universal affront to a comprehensive (because of white
supremacy, implicitly white) "female form." This tendency can be seen in "Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein,*" in which Anne K. Mellor argues that "Frankenstein's scientific project—to become the sole creator of a human being—supports a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality" (274). While this isn't untrue per se, Mellor ignores the racial dimension inherent in the Western project of empire and the resulting differences in the experiences of white British women and the slave women who suffered doubled intersection of femaleness and blackness. Failing to acknowledge those differences, and in fact failing to acknowledge nonwhite women at all, Mellor implicitly categorizes the women discussed in this sort of feminist theorizing as white women. By placing the violence enacted by Victor on a supposedly universal but implicitly white female/nature composite, and ignoring the specific violence enacted by white imperialism against the bodies of black slave women, Mellor appropriates violence against black slave women to make a feminist argument that seeks to defend, heal, and empower white women. A similar trend can be found in critical discussion of *Frankenstein,* Shelley, and motherhood.

Critics have devoted considerable attention to the concept of motherhood in *Frankenstein,* generally by way of Victor’s role as mother-usurping single parent. Ellen Moers draws on biographical information about Shelley’s several miscarriages and short-lived children, the fact that her mother died in Shelley’s childbirth, and the multiple deaths chronologically surrounding the composition of *Frankenstein* to argue that “Surely no outside influence need be sought to explain Mary Shelley’s fantasy of the newborn as at once monstrous agent of destruction and piteous victim of parental abandonment” (Moers 222), and that what Mary Shelley “actually” accomplished in the novel was to
“transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide, and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery” (Moers 224). Barbara Johnson also approaches *Frankenstein* through a biographical lens that reads the text as a metaphor or cipher for Shelley’s issues with motherhood, pregnancy, and their connections with artistic generation, noting that “the desire to create a being like oneself—which is the autobiographical desire par excellence—is also the central transgression in Mary Shelley’s novel” (Johnson 243). Referencing criticism interpreting Victor’s flight from the Creature and its subsequent violence as a metaphor for post-partum depression (Johnson 246), Johnson goes on to argue that *Frankenstein*, as autobiographical fiction written by a woman, acts as a kind of self-birthing or self-mothering (Johnson 249) by which Shelley creates herself as she creates the story. Breaking with the tendency to prioritize biography in discussions of *Frankenstein* and motherhood, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus on the “literariness” of the novel and work to untangle the threads between Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, exploring similarities between Shelley’s Victor and Creature and Milton’s Satan and Eve, and pointing out the “distended body of Mary Shelley’s darkly parodic Eve/Sin/Monster, whose enormity betokens not only the enormity of Victor Frankenstein’s crime and Stan’s bulk but also the distentions or deformities of pregnancy” (Gillbert and Gubar 240).

Critics have been quick to mine Shelley’s life for biographical insights into *Frankenstein*, but that emphasis on biography, like Mellor’s whitewashed universal woman, assumes that Shelley, as an author writing from the positionality of a white, educated, able-bodied, upper-class (etc.) woman, created a text infused with and communicating only (to borrow again from Benjamin Lawson) white meanings. Again,
the urge toward biographical criticism is particularly understandable with *Frankenstein*, but it still presents a problem. If Victor is the Creature's father, critics are assuming that Shelley, as the only available white woman (with Elizabeth and Victor's mother dead), is the Creature's putative mother. The possibility that the Creature possesses a mother within the text, a silenced, mutilated mother, never seems to occur to white critics, and *that* failure of imagination works hand-in-hand with Shelley's to reinforce the erasure of the Creature's black mother.

Shelley gives readers an absentee father in Victor, but she apparently misses the metaphorical motherhood of the bodies he unearths and desecrates. Likewise she seems unaware of the parallels between those bodies and the bodies of black women displaced, mutilated, and killed by British imperialism. In the novel, Victor's experiments lead him to dig up bodies to study the effects of decomposition and the structure of human anatomy, and although the language Shelley employs to describe his studies evokes Britain's white, patriarchal imperialism it does so without giving voice, face, or agency to the bodies so ill treated. Victor heedlessly "pursued nature to her hiding places" (Shelley 32) in a frenzied trance of gristly research and experimentation, but the perspective provided shows only the trauma Victor undergoes as his efforts near culmination. He was "oppressed by a slow fever and [he] became nervous to a most painful degree" (Shelley 33), he denied himself contact with loved ones, lost the pleasure of appreciating nature, and after the Creature's awakening fell into a nervous fit, but these symptoms, like Victor's tale in its entirety, reduce the cost of imperialism to the consequences to white conquerors, consequences engendered by their efforts and displayed to the detriment of attention to the suffering of their black victims. It might be argued that the Creature's own
tale works against this centering of white pain, but because Shelley humanizes the Creature at the expense of the erased black mother—its humanity is validated by its successful adoption of white speech, mannerisms, desires—the Creature's account only further prioritizes the concerns of whiteness.

One of the main ways Shelley shapes the Creature's testimony to cast it in a sympathetic light is to emphasize the contrast between its monstrous (read: black) appearance and its noble and intelligent (read: white) interior self. Although the Creature is in a sense a biracial child, Shelley presents it as initially a blank slate, an empty vessel waiting to be taught the values and knowledge of its white father's culture. Considering the white audience Shelley is targeting, this choice is pragmatic but problematic—by portraying the Creature as untainted by blackness beyond its physiology, Shelley alleviates concerns that the Creature is a "true" monster. It's one of the "good ones," a person inhabiting a body perceived to be black but who won't challenge readers by having ties to a nonwhite history, language, or culture, and so white readers empathize with it without having to confront their own racism or participation in the engines of racial oppression. If *Frankenstein* is something of an abolitionist text, the argument it makes isn't that slavery is morally wrong because black slaves are human beings whose basic rights are brutally and systemically violated to support white industry and international supremacy, but that the slaves essentially are, or are willing to *become* white if given the chance. By creating the Creature as a tabula rasa, Shelley suggests that the slaves have no culture, language, or history of their own, or if they do, it's inconsequential, superfluous, swiftly and easily discarded in favor of the "superior" white
counterparts, as evinced in the Creature's education with the de Lacey family and the character of Safie.

After its painful post-birth sensory overload and near-starvation, the Creature finds a source of knowledge and unknowing companionship in the exiled but cultured and educated de Lacey family, where he is soon joined by the only other significant nonwhite character of the novel, Safie, who Shelley invests with similarly problematic issues of racial identity. Like the Creature, Safie is both metaphorically biracial and eager to abandon all nonwhite characteristics in favor of her white background. Just as the Creature is the child of Victor and the erased black mother, Safie is the child of her Turkish father and her innocent and pure (pseudo-white) Christian mother. It can be argued that instead of Safie's mother being implicitly white, her ability to successfully enter white society is the result of the different perceptions of "Arab" women and African slaves. To Shelley and her audience the former could be seen as alluring, exotic, and in need of rescuing, while the latter were viewed as inherently subhuman and at best needing paternalistic efforts of charity on their behalf. In addition, unlike the Creature, Safie has the assistance of her appearance to smooth her transition from racial Other to acceptable peer of society: her "wondrously fair" complexion (Shelley 78) and "angelic beauty" make her compatible with the standards of white female beauty and stand in contrast to the Creature's demonic "African" features.

Although Safie is connected to her Arabic heritage and upbringing through her foreign tongue and unfamiliarity with European customs, Shelley deemphasizes her differences from the de Laceys by stressing Safie's bond with her Christian mother in opposition to her opportunistic and deceitful father. Safie's mother, "a Christian Arab"
(Shelley 83) who "taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet," plants the seed of Safie's desire to flee her homeland so that "a residence in Turkey was abhorrent to her" (Shelley 85) and she "sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and the being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue" (Shelley 83). By contrast, Shelley describes Safie's Turkish father as "the treacherous Turk" who "became a traitor to good feeling and honour" (Shelley 84), and she proves Safie's fidelity to the de Laceys, Christianity, and whiteness by having her "generous nature" be "outraged" by her father's actions, a symbolic repudiation of her Arabic self which, coupled with her "white" looks and properly Christian marriage to Felix—she longed to fulfill her dream of "marrying a Christian" (Shelley 83)—allows her to exist within white society as an acceptable aberration instead of as a monster. In Safie, Shelley shows the reader the ideal result in race relations according to the values of whiteness: Safie casts off her Arabic self and emerges as a Christian bride integrated into a respectable white family.

Because it lacks Safie's almost-white features and suffers mistreatment and parental abandonment, the Creature can never find the ostensibly happy assimilationist ending she enjoys. Shelley's choice to write the Creature as a unique being lacking attachments to any preexisting society creates fertile existential angst, but at the cost of reducing the slave it represents to a victim who, lacking a distinct racial identity, can only make doomed efforts at imitating the white culture it comes into contact with. The erased
black mother represents not only the literal mother Shelley denies the Creature, but also the rich cultural heritage Shelley cannot imagine the slave possessing.

The Creature's quest to force Victor to create a female of its species can be read as a failed attempt to recapture, or perhaps reincarnate, the erased black mother. Like Shelley, the Creature is limited in its imagining its own prehistory, and can only conceive of a female version of itself damaged by the predations of slavery. It demands "a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself," acknowledging that "we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world" but hoping that "on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (Shelley 99). Not only can the Creature not envision a version of itself free from the bondage of its oppression, it actively tries to create a pre-established system of patriarchy within which it can have privilege over the female of the species. Speaking of his prospective bride, the Creature claims that their lives "will not be happy, but they will be harmless" (Shelley 99), and he assures Victor that if he performs a second act of creation, "neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again; I will go to the vast wilds of South America...My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare," adding that "with the companion you bestow, I will quit the neighborhood of man, and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage of places" (Shelley 99). The promises the Creature offers Victor, based as they are on patriarchal constructions of gender and the female's implied obedience to the Creature's vows on her behalf, can produce only a new field of oppression in imitation of the human/white systems Shelley offers as examples. Shelley has something of the right idea in the Creature's decision to "quit the neighborhood of [the white] man," since the Creature's cohabitation with humanity leads only to pain and death for everyone involved, and the
Creature's removal can be read as flight from the destructive cultural scripts of white imperialism, but instead of having the Creature try to create some new system that promotes freedom, or (ideally) return in some way to the lost roots of the erased black mother, Shelley writes it into the trap of unselfconsciously reproducing the gender narratives of white patriarchy, a failure stemming from her core inability to imagine any other way of being. It's conspicuous that the Creature, a "miscegenetic" child of a white father and a metaphorical black mother, has no African homeland to return to, only the vague, wild, inhospitable outskirts of (white) humanity to inhabit.

Even at the level of the frame narrative of Walton's Arctic journey Shelley directs the novel's anti-imperialist message to a white audience, and shapes that message to appeal to white concerns and priorities. Victor cautions Walton by describing "how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley 31), a warning against white male imperialism distancing itself too far from the white female domestic space not because the project of empire devastates other countries or tears apart families of other ethnicities, but because it results in the "destruction and infallible misery" (Shelley 31) of upper-class white men and to their women and children. Walton conveys Victor's warning to his sister, the distillation of the domestic sphere of which Elizabeth, William, and Justine are part, and shows a marked change in attitude after internalizing Victor's tale. His scientific adventure, seen through the anti-imperialist lens of Victor's story, leaves him feeling "encompassed by peril, and ignorant whether I am ever doomed to see again dear England" (Shelley 148), while at the same time fearful that Margaret "will not hear of [his] destruction...Years will pass, and you will have visitings of despair, and yet be
tortured by hope" (Shelley 148). Shortly after hearing the conclusion of Victor's tale he agrees to the crew's demand to return to England, having lost his "hopes of utility and glory" (Shelley 150) but, following Victor's admonishment to "Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition" (Shelley 152), perhaps saved himself and his family from the backlash of imperialist pursuits.

Shelley ends the novel with the ambivalent disappearance of the Creature into shadow and ice. The Creature doesn't die, but the reader is left with little reason to suppose it could ever reenter the precincts of humanity, and because Shelley has stripped it of a racial identity beyond that of failed whiteness, it has no alternative—no alterity—to embrace. As Criscillia Benford notes, "The novel's eerie, inconclusive ending reminds us that in Gothic novels the dead do not always lie quietly in their graves and that hypodiegetic characters may insolently transgress the 'sacred' boundaries that classical narratology regards as designed to contain them" (Benford 327). Benford explores the Creature's status as a narrative object existing in multiple narrative layers and operating on several layers of meaning-making, but her observation is relevant to discussion of the Creature's racial identity. The inconclusive ending Benford describes is a result of Shelley's failure of imagination. The Creature, which attempts to "transgress" racial borders by absorbing white history, literature, and language, finds an ending suited to its insoluble racial identity. Unable to become white, neither can it be black without the humanizing presence of the erased black mother that Shelley refuses to provide, and its disappearance into obscure Arctic wilderness reflects its narrative passage from following a linear plot—to be accepted by white humanity, or failing that to construct a makeshift
white humanity with a mate created by Victor—to the incoherence caused by the impossibility of either option.

Reading *Frankenstein* side-by-side with Butler’s canon offers the opportunity for a number of insights into how race and technology perform within SF. Contrasts abound, of course, but perhaps more valuable are the similarities in the works of the two authors. Both Shelley and Butler write about black bodies being subject to invasive technologies, and in both women’s stories we can see parallels to the Tuskegee, HeLa, and “Venus Hottentot” examples of white science violating black bodies for the benefit of white people. Victor unearths and examines the decaying corpses that stand in for the Creature’s black mother with no more concern for consent than the Tuskegee researchers had for their hundreds of black “patients,” and with the HeLa researchers’ moral lapse regarding sharing the benefits of his discoveries with the people whose bodies made his science possible. Victor’s intentions betray his allegiance to white supremacy as enabled by white science when he expects that “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his children more completely as I should deserve theirs” (Shelley 32). His imperialistic, racially charged experiment drives headlong towards a goal of racial supremacy and outright slavery, coated in vile rhetoric a race "owing" him "deserved" "gratitude." He violates black bodies with science to empower himself and establish (or, considering the racial realities of his time, continue) a racial hierarchy, and when one thinks of the Creature he births and his horrified reaction to it, the specter of Sarah Baartman, the "Venus Hottentot," rises inevitably to mind, as does the phrase Crais and Scully use to describe her: a black body "entombed in science and figured ever more
prominently in the Western imagining of women, race, and sexuality" (Crais and Scully 2). *Frankenstein* is a text well grounded in the perspective of white science and a strong example of the white SF that emerges from that oppressive mindset.

While *Frankenstein* accurately represents the interactions of white science and black bodies, and therefore to some degree sheds visibility on those interactions, Shelley's erasure of the Creature's black mother is also the erasure of the racial Other's agency, history, and identity. In *Frankenstein* black bodies are not just victimized: they're also silenced, a silence that reflects the silencing of black voices in SF as a genre. The difference between Shelley's presentation of black bodies victimized by white science, and Butler's novels in which black characters are similarly assaulted by science fiction devices that parallel historical atrocities, is that Butler's fiction allows for the black victims of white science to voice their own stories, to speak about their experiences on their own terms and from their own perspectives. Butler's protagonists are frequently compromised, threatened, or defeated by scientific devices. Their minds are controlled by telepathy (Teray in *Patternmaster*), their bodies are chemically altered by disease (Blake in *Clay's Ark*, the characters of her short stories "Speech Sounds" and "Crossover") or alien technology (Lilith and all that's left of humanity in *Dawn*), or the results of drugs (Lauren Olamina in the *Parable* duology). This theme of inevitable violation, the truth that no one is safe from the invasive power of science, emerges from the history of blackness and white science, but Butler doesn't allow her characters' victimhood to negate their humanity. Butler's characters may be assaulted or forcibly influenced by science fictional devices, but they also find ways to navigate within their oppressed circumstances. This isn't to say they always succeed in defeating or escaping those
circumstances, but Butler grants them agency and choice within the confines of their external limitations, and in creating systems of oppression that can't be easily dismantled, Butler more accurately reflects the realities of black communities and the complexity and overwhelming difficulty of effecting change in racist institutions as a person oppressed by said institutions. In Butler's fiction black characters suffer, struggle, and sometimes die, but they die in their own stories, humanized and making their own choices, and the suffering they undergo reflects realities of genuine race issues. If black pain serves a political purpose in Butler's work, it's to recognize and honor the pain of actual black people, and to help illuminate strategies by which further suffering might be alleviated, avoided, or navigated.

In stark contrast, to Shelley, the racial tragedy of the Creature exists to develop her cautions against British imperialism for the benefit of the white domestic sphere. The suffering of black bodies caused by white science exists in her texts solely to drive a lesson benefitting white readers, just as historical experiments like the Tuskegee trials occurred for their medical benefits to financially secure white people. Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* even more closely parallels Shelley's use of black bodies in that Skloot, like Shelley, advances her literary career by using the violation of the black body as fodder for her writing. In white SF, as in white science, black bodies are only included when they can serve white needs and ambitions.
Conclusion:

Among other things, science fiction is a tool for imagining futures. SF authors take what they currently understand about science, couple it with their understanding of human nature, and spin stories that inform, encourage, or warn us about what might be possible. In this sense SF functions in a role adjacent to scientific inquiry, acting as a mouthpiece for the potential revealed or made accessible by developing technology.

What can sometimes go unsaid in conversations about SF is that science fiction, like science itself, does not exist in a vacuum removed from cultural scripts and problems. When written by white authors who by definition are limited in their perception or and ability to recognize textual racism, SF runs the risk of falling prey to conceits of impartiality and cultural objectivity--to assume that it's written by, for, and about a supposed universal audience, and conveys universal meanings.

As we've seen in *Frankenstein*, the worlds and futures created by white SF can reproduce and reinforce the racist ideologies of their sociological context of origin when they portray bodies of color as dehumanized, objectified, or otherwise dependent on or lesser than white people and the demands of whiteness. When we imagine futures, it's important to pay attention to who we include in them and who, by their absence, is presented as inherently superfluous. When people of color don't appear in SF, a message is sent that the future is not for them; that they are not a vital, necessary component of our past, present, and future. When bodies of color appear solely to embody white concerns, SF strays into repeating dangerous tropes informed by and informing deadly strains of white science that view nonwhite bodies as chattel or fuel existing to serve white needs.
Scholars of SF have a responsibility to tease out racial power dynamics in the genre. If this seems an onerous demand, I suggest referring to the litany of sins white science has performed under the veil of impartiality or proto-colorblindness. Anti-racism is not something that occurs organically, instinctively, or even as an inevitable result of education or a conscious desire to avoid or combat racism. Diligent effort and tireless, consistent critique—of authors, scholars, and even readers—are necessary to avoid mindlessly regurgitating the lessons absorbed from the hegemony of whiteness. For critics of SF, this means that we must be vigilant for traces and reflections of white supremacy and anti-blackness in not only each text we encounter, but also the scholarship and discourse surrounding those texts. Considering texts like *Frankenstein* is important because they have laid the foundations of the genre and anticipate many of its racist underpinnings. Examining the very different presentations of science and race in Octavia Butler's fiction allows us to see how the "stamp" of black SF can undermine that streak of racism and repurpose the genre toward illuminating, not erasing, race, and imagining futures in which science and blackness interact without exploitation or abuse.

Obviously this thesis has only been able to cover a limited part of the wider discussion of race, science, and SF, and there are plenty of questions that could not be adequately addressed here. My project has dealt solely with racism in the genre as it applies to anti-black racism, but racism directed at First Nations and Latino/a populations, for example, deserves its own serious scrutiny. A comparison of Butler's canon and the critical discourse surrounding her work with those of other prominent black authors could provide valuable insight into the intersections of gender, race, and critical reaction in SF. As this project progresses I've become increasingly aware of the
lack of a full-length biography written about Octavia Butler, which might shed light on
the author's own perceptions of and goals for her body of work. Additional investigations
of Butler and Shelley together might take a more gendered approach than I apply here,
expanding on the differences in scholarship about the two female authors of SF and
focusing on how each chose to address so-called "women's issues" according to their
specific experiences and contexts. I'd like to see essays studying current trends in SF that
try to determine where the wind is blowing today, to know if racist portrayals of black
bodies in SF are becoming a thing of the past, or if (as I suspect) they remain widespread,
and if so, why and what can be done about it.


http://rebeccaskloot.com/faq/#questions-science


Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Frankenstein and a Critique of Imperialism."


1 For further reading on the subject of black SF, the difficulties of authors of color seeking publication in the genre, and the concept of black futurist fiction, see Gregory E. Rutledge’s “Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The Racial Establishment.”

2 Alternatively, the human-Oankali melding can be viewed as the formation of a cyborg body; see Cathy Peppers’ “Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler’s Xenogenesis” for more.

3 For an exploration of power dynamics in this duology, as well as Fledgling, see Lauren Lacey’s “Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents, and Fledgling.”