

reload

rethinking women + cyberculture

edited by
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CYBORG FEMINISM: THE SCIENCE FICTION OF OCTAVIA E. BUTLER AND GLORIA ANZALDÚA

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You have to realize this planet is not only inhabited by humans, it's inhabited by aliens too. . . . The danger spot is the United States. . . . It was possible for aliens and angels and devils and demons to come in this country. They didn't need no passport.

—*Sun Ra, qtd. in John Corbett, Extended Play*

Throughout the twentieth century, representations of and references to space, science and technology permeated much African American literature, music, and art, from W. E. B. Du Bois's 1920 short story "The Comet," to the futuristic soundscapes of DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid.¹ Linking science fiction and black cultural production, journalist Greg Tate observes, "The imaginative leap that we associate with science fiction, in terms of putting the human into an alien and alienating environment, is a gesture that repeatedly appears in the work of black writers and visual artists" (Dery 1993, 765–766). In addition to grappling with the alien and alienated, many black writers, artists and musicians, such as Walter Mosley, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the band Earth Wind & Fire, insert Africans and/or African Americans into what Tate describes as "a visionary landscape" (Dery 1993, 765).² Often, this landscape is sci-fi-esque—that is, it is one of computers, spaceships, alien creatures and intergalactic travel.

In recent years, black science fiction—or Afrofuturism (i.e., "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American concerns in the context of . . . technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" [Dery 1993, 736])—has received much critical attention. In "Brothers from Another Planet," John Corbett locates the music of Lee "Scratch" Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton in an Afrofuturist context (Corbett 1994). Most recently, Sheree R. Thomas has collected and published short stories and critical

essays on black science fiction in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (Thomas 2000). And, at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association in October 2000, Nalo Hopkinson, author of two published science-fiction novels, chaired a panel entitled "Afrofuturist Dreams: Recasting Race, Recasting Technoculture."³

For Octavia E. Butler, one of the most prolific and well-known black science-fiction writers, science fiction is "potentially the freest genre in existence" (Beal 1986, 14). Like other Afrofuturist texts, many of Butler's novels and short stories insert black people, as well as women and other people of color, into narratives of science, technology, and "progress." At the same time, they interrogate narratives of science and technology as "progress."

What's more, Butler's science fiction explores essence, position (i.e., social constructedness), and the boundary that supposedly separates the two via the figure of the cyborg. Drawing from Donna Haraway's concept of "cyborg identity," I argue that Butler's novels *Wild Seed* (1980) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) critique fixed concepts of race, gender, sexuality and humanity, and, subsequently, "fictions" of identity and community. I conclude this study by comparing Butler's novels to Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and by offering a theory of and for "New World," feminist science fiction. The cyborg—that is, the subject that simultaneously exceeds and emphasizes the boundaries of identity and community—is at the center of both Butler's and Anzaldúa's work. Through the figure of the cyborg, the two writers theorize a woman-of-color feminism that articulates (i.e., enunciates and links) both essence and position.

Before I begin my discussion of Butler's and Anzaldúa's texts, I provide a cursory history of science fiction by women. Then, for the sake of clarity, I offer a working definition of science fiction, even though it is a genre that, in many ways, resists definition. Next, I examine Haraway's concept of the cyborg and its relationship to and implications for feminism for and by women of color. Ultimately, I hope to illustrate that science fiction is not simply escapist fantasy, but a creative and politicized "space" for the articulation of the pasts, presents, and possible futures of the "aliens" and passport-less of the New World.

Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before?: African American and Feminist Science Fiction

In a 1993 interview, acclaimed science-fiction novelist and critic Samuel R. Delany estimated that there were only four black science-fiction authors writing in the English language: Octavia E. Butler, Steven Barnes, Charles Saunders, and himself.⁴ Because of its

putative origins in and its focus on so-called hard science, science fiction historically seems to have been the domain of men and boys. Indeed, the stereotypical sci-fi fan is a middle-class, white, male, adolescent nerd. "The flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction [from the 1950s through the 1970s] functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly," Delany explained. "They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, 'Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!'" (Dery 1993, 744).

In defining science fiction, science-fiction writer, critic, and publisher Isaac Asimov emphasizes science and technology. He links the genre with the European and North American Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and argues, "True science fiction deals with human science, with the continuing advance of knowledge, with the continuing ability of human beings to make themselves better understand the universe." Linking science fiction with what appears to be a Foucauldian power-knowledge couplet, as well as with what hints at imperialism and colonialism, Asimov adds that "true science fiction" highlights humans' "continuing ability . . . to alter some parts [of the universe] for their own comfort and security by the ingenuity of their ideas" (Asimov 1983, 10). In other words, science fiction, for Asimov, is concerned with (and posits an unproblematic relationship between) science, technology, knowledge, and human progress. Moreover, it lauds man's conquest of "the universe" (the cosmos? nature? the unknown?) via science and technology.

Even though the concepts of science, technology, and, by extension, science fiction itself, have been gendered masculine, women have been producing what a number of critics have designated "science fiction" since the early nineteenth century (at least). In fact, several science-fiction writers and critics point to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as an origin of science fiction.⁵ Excavating a genealogy of women science fiction writers, Pamela Sargent claims the nineteenth-century fantasy writers Marie Corelli, Rhoda Broughton, Sara Coleridge, and Jane Loudon as pioneers of women's science fiction; she places Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) within "[t]he utopian tradition" of science fiction; and she lists roughly fifty-six women science-fiction writers of the twentieth century, beginning with Gertrude Barrows Bennett, who published *The Heads of Cerberus* under the pseudonym Francis Stevens in 1919 (Sargent 1995a).

Several women, most notably C. L. Moore, Leigh Brackett, Judith Merrill, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, produced science fiction prior to the 1960s. However, with second-wave feminism and the advent of "New Wave" (i.e., "soft") science fiction in the 1960s, more women began to write, publish, and read science fiction.⁶ What's more,

some women writers, such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Vonda N. McIntyre, began to receive critical attention for their work. In *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sarah Lefanu notes that no woman received the prestigious Hugo Award for science fiction between 1953 (its inception) and 1967, but that between 1968 and 1984, eleven women won it. In addition, she points out that 1974 saw the first “women and science fiction” panel at a science-fiction convention (Lefanu 1988).

1974 also saw the publication of Sargent’s *Women of Wonder*, the first collection of “science fiction stories by women about women.” *Women of Wonder* was followed by Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson’s *Aurora: Beyond Equality* (1976), a collection of feminist science fiction. Since then, Sargent has published four more collections of science-fiction stories by women and about women, as well as her own science fiction. Furthermore, the body of criticism on women’s science fiction has grown.⁷

In his 1981 essay, “My Definition of Science Fiction,” Philip K. Dick, author of scores of critically acclaimed science-fiction novels and short stories, offers a definition of science fiction different from Asimov’s. According to Dick, science fiction need not limit itself to spaceships and zap guns. Such props are usually found in what Dick considers “space adventure”—that is, “adventure, fights, and wars in the future in space involving superadvanced technology” (Dick 1995, 99). Dick distinguishes space adventure from science fiction by placing the latter in the everyday world of the present—“our world,” as he phrases it—rather than in a fantastical future world. However, science fiction, according to Dick, does not leave our world intact. Instead, it distorts it. He explains, “We have a fictitious world; that is the first step: [i]t is a society that does not in fact exist, but is predicated on our known society—that is, our known society acts as a jumping-off point for it. . . . It is our world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet” (99).

In short, Dick claims that the science-fiction writer fabricates a world that mirrors “our known society” but is slightly different. This difference “must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society—or in any known society present or past.” Dislocation, then, not science and technology, is the “essence of science fiction,” according to Dick. Science fiction distorts our society “so that as a result a new society is generated in the author’s mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader’s mind.” Dick terms this dislocation on the part of the reader “the shock of dysrecognition” (Dick 1995, 99).

Similarly, literary critic Darko Suvin defines science fiction as the literature of “cognitive estrangement.” Suvin draws the concept of “estrangement” from the work of Bertolt Brecht. He quotes Brecht: “A representation which estranges is one which

allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Suvin 1976, 60). Like Dick, Suvin claims that science fiction embodies both “the ideal extreme of exact recreation of the author’s empirical environment . . . [and] interest in a strange newness, a novum” (58–59). He defines science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presences and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (62).

The conventions of dysrecognition and estrangement resemble the Freudian concept of the uncanny: that which is simultaneously recognizable and unfamiliar. While they beg the questions “Whose world is ‘our world?’” and “What if an ‘author’s empirical environment’ differs greatly from that of his or her reader?,” both are valuable for understanding science fiction as a viable medium for questioning the status quo. Both concepts equip the student of science fiction with a vocabulary for exploring ideology as a representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence.⁸ That is, dysrecognition and estrangement denaturalize and relativize that which is supposedly natural, common, obvious, innate, and immutable. In doing so, they enable us to identify and question overarching, yet seemingly invisible, social systems and regulatory ideals, such as capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, sex, gender, man, and woman. Moreover, dysrecognition and estrangement allow us to imagine epistemological and ontological alternatives.

The science fiction of Asimov and many other writers of the first half of the twentieth century praised man, technology, and, in the words of one critic, “the nature and significance of the scientific method” (Canary 1977, 164). Their work did not necessarily interrogate the relationships between technology and “progress,” knowledge and power, and exploration and expansion. Yet, with the techniques of dysrecognition and estrangement, science fiction—in particular, feminist and African American science fiction—has evolved into a significant literary mode for critics of ideology. Indeed, “science fiction’s most important use,” according to science-fiction writer and critic Kingsley Amis, “is a means of dramatising social enquiry, as providing a fictional mode in which cultural tendencies can be isolated and judged” (Amis 1960, 54).

Wild Seed and Parable of the Sower: Not So Long Ago and Not in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

In a 1981 interview, Octavia E. Butler stated, “I began writing about power because I had so little” (Davidson 1981, 35). Undeniably, Butler uses science fiction to scrutinize power relations (i.e., social hierarchies based on race, gender, and sexuality) and to explore ways of subverting and/or destroying power without replicating or reproducing

it. Butler was raised in Pasadena, California. Her father died when she was an infant and her mother worked as a maid (See 1993, 50). Butler describes herself as “a pessimist if I’m not careful, a feminist always, a black, a quiet egoist, [and] a former Baptist.”⁹ A product of the social movements of the 1960s, she claims that the “black consciousness raising that was taking place at the time” impacted her writing (Beal 1986, 15). Butler began publishing science-fiction short stories in 1970, and her first novel, *Patternmaster*, appeared in print in 1976. Since then, she has published a total of eleven novels and numerous short stories, and she has won the Hugo and Nebula awards, two of science fiction’s most prestigious literary prizes.

While much of Butler’s science fiction takes place in outer space and many of her characters are aliens and monsters,¹⁰ her novels *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* exemplify science fiction as defined by Dick and Suvin: Both are set on Earth (albeit at very different times); their protagonists are not extraterrestrials (but they are not typical or normal human beings either); and both texts are seemingly verisimilar (i.e., they appear to present realistic worlds—worlds, that, in some ways, mirror “the author’s empirical environment”). However, the settings of *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* are not Butler’s late-twentieth-century Southern California. They represent, to quote Dick (1981) once again, “societ[ies] that [do] not in fact exist, but [are] predicated on our known [i.e., Butler’s] society” (99). As a story set in the past, *Wild Seed* is historically accurate; that is, it draws from the history of slavery and African migration to and through the New World. *Parable of the Sower*, on the other hand, draws from the author’s present; it exaggerates and distorts her “empirical environment.” Although fiction, many of the events that take place in the two novels are plausible. However, both *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* “estrangle” the reader, for their “subjects” (i.e., their subject matter and their actors) are simultaneously recognizable and unfamiliar.

Wild Seed opens in a West African village in 1690 and closes on a plantation in Louisiana in 1840. Anyanwu, the novel’s protagonist, is a three-hundred-year-old black woman. She is also a mutant; that is, she has the ability to change forms. Throughout the course of the novel, Anyanwu, whose original form is that of a young Igbo woman, transforms herself into an elderly Igbo priestess, a young black man, a leopard, an eagle, a dolphin, a dog, and a wealthy white man. In addition, she is seemingly immortal: she possesses superhuman strength and the ability to heal herself (and others) if physically injured.

Throughout *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu is engaged in a power struggle with Doro, a four-thousand-year-old *ogbanje* (evil spirit) with the power and need to “possess” others. Unlike Anyanwu, who is able to transform her own flesh into a seemingly unlimited number of life forms, Doro must constantly kill people in order to inhabit their bodies.

He “wears” a body until it grows too tired, then he discards it, as a snake sheds its skin, and preys upon another.

At one time in their lives, Anyanwu and Doro were normal mortals. However, both experienced bizarre illnesses and were transformed. Anyanwu experienced her “transition” as a young woman; Doro as a boy. His body died as a result of the illness, but his spirit transmigrated to the body of another human being. Since then, Doro has roamed the earth gathering what he terms “wild seed”: men, women and children with paranormal abilities. He helps some and destroys others. Violent and power-hungry, he breeds, owns, and rules all of them.

When Doro encounters Anyanwu for the first time, he decides that she will make a valuable addition to his bizarre eugenics project. He presses her to leave Africa and join him in a settlement he has established in North America, where he claims she will not be made to feel a misfit. Doro insists that they belong together because of their special powers and promises her marriage, yet she refuses. In her three hundred years, Anyanwu has borne forty-seven children to ten husbands. “If you come with me, I think someday, I can show you children you will never have to bury,” Doro offers. “A mother should not have to watch her children grow old and die” (Butler 1980, 22). After failing to cajole Anyanwu, Doro threatens to kill her descendants (of whom there are many generations) if she does not accompany him. Reluctantly, she yields to his demand.

As soon as they arrive in Doro’s settlement of Wheatley, New York, Anyanwu realizes that she is now Doro’s slave. Fixated on blood and genetic stock, Doro intends to breed Anyanwu with various men from his numerous settlements, for “[s]he was wild seed of the best kind. She would strengthen any line he bred her into” (Butler 1980, 22). Eventually, Anyanwu escapes from Wheatley, first by transforming herself into an eagle and flying to the Atlantic coast, then by transforming herself into a dolphin and swimming back to Africa. For decades, Doro searches for her, yet he is unable to track her when she assumes animal form.

Finally, after 150 years of separation, Doro and Anyanwu reunite in Louisiana, where Anyanwu has formed her own community of men, women, and children with strange abilities (some can read others’ thoughts, some can see images from the past, some can feel others’ emotions). Although she is now living in the “race-conscious culture” of the antebellum South, Anyanwu manages to shape a heterogeneous community reflective of the population of the New World: It is composed of African Americans, Euro-Americans, Native Americans, and mixed-race people (Butler 1980, 221). Yet, unlike Doro, she does not intimidate, torment, or dominate those who surround her; they are not her slaves. Rather, they are family: “[s]he gathered people to her

and cared for them and helped them care for each other" (231). Unlike Doro, Anyanwu builds a community based not on genetic stock or blood, but choice.

Unlike *Wild Seed*, which is set in the past, *Parable of the Sower* offers a much more common science-fiction scenario: dystopia. The year is 2024 and pollution, global warming, drought, economic crisis, and numerous other ills plague the earth. The novel takes the form of the journal of Lauren Olamina, a bored, frustrated, and precocious African American teenager who lives with her family in Robledo, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Only a handful of families compose Robledo, which is protected from the outside world by a makeshift wall.

In Butler's twenty-first century, Southern California is desperately dry. Slavery and indentured servitude are legal once again. Canadian and Asian corporations own factories in the United States called "borderworks"—which bear a strong resemblance to the current-day *maquilas* of northern Mexico. At borderworks, laborers are overworked, underpaid, and forced to rely on their employers for food and shelter. Those who still hold jobs that pay cash live within small, beleaguered, walled enclaves like Robledo. Outside, hordes of wretched, homeless scavengers and violent, pyromaniac junkies (known as "paints" because they shave their heads and cover their bodies with paint) murder for water, food, and weapons.

Because her mother abused a drug while she was pregnant with her, Lauren is a "sharer"; that is, she suffers from "hyperempathy," a genetic condition that causes her to experience others' physical sensations as viscerally as her own. "I'm supposed to share pleasure and pain," she writes, "but there isn't much pleasure around these days" (Butler 1995, 12).¹¹ If Lauren sees an injured person, or if she injures someone, his or her pain automatically becomes her own. "This is a rough disability for her time," Butler explained in a 1993 interview. "Lauren's ability is perceived as a problem, not a power" (See 1993, 51).

When a gang of paints raids Robledo, Lauren's entire family is murdered and her community is destroyed. Alone, she decides to head north, where rumor has it that "water doesn't cost more than food and . . . work brings a salary" (Butler 1995, 155). But, before her departure, Lauren encounters two other Robledo survivors: Harry Balter, a young white man, and Zahra Moss, a young black woman. Together, they join the stream of refugees walking north along California's derelict highways.

As they travel, Lauren, Harry, and Zahra must protect themselves from wild dogs, beggars, thieves, rapists, murderers, and cannibals. At first, Harry wants to trust other travelers, but Zahra, who was raised on the outside and arrived in Robledo as a jaded

young woman, warns him against this. Because they are unable to trust others and must kill or be killed, Harry fears that he, Zahra, and Lauren will “turn into animals.” He fears that they will become like the dangerous and desperate men, women, and children who prey upon them. “In a way, we do [have to turn into animals],” Lauren tells Harry. “We’re a pack, the three of us, and all those other people out there aren’t in it. If we’re a good pack, and we work together, we have a chance” (Butler 1995, 168). As they journey north, Harry, Zahra and Lauren evolve into a “good pack”: They learn to protect and trust one another. Eventually, they extend their trust and protection to others and their group grows from three to fourteen.

Despite the racial and ethnic tensions that infest Butler’s twenty-first century, the group with whom Lauren travels is as racially and ethnically diverse as Southern California itself: It is composed of African Americans, Euro-Americans, Latinas/os, Asians, men, women, and children. Some are ex-prostitutes and ex-slaves. When Lauren invites two former slaves to join the group, she warns and reassures them, “[W]e don’t kill unless someone threatens us . . . We don’t hunt people. We don’t eat human flesh. We fight together against enemies. If one of us is in need, the rest help out. And we don’t steal from one another, ever . . . A group is strong. One or two people are easier to rob and kill” (Butler 1995, 275–276).

Regardless of their differences, all members of the group are displaced and dispossessed in one way or another. All have lost friends and family members to murder and/or slavery. Yet, Lauren realizes that her group constitutes a new kind of family. “In spite of your loss and pain, you aren’t alone,” she writes in her journal. “You still have people who care about you and want you to be all right. You still have family” (Butler 1995, 277).

Like Anyanwu, Lauren builds a community based not on blood, but choice. She dreams of a better world, and with her evolving religion, “Earthseed,” she hopes to establish an enclave that will survive the bleak period in which she lives. According to Earthseed, “God Is Change” (Butler 1995, 3). Underscoring human agency, Lauren writes that members of the religion “are to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny.” Earthseed’s destiny is the establishment of human life in outer space— “[a] real heaven, not a mythology or philosophy. A heaven that will be theirs to shape,” Lauren writes in her journal (which she has entitled *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*) (Butler 1995, 240).

Finally, Lauren begins to realize the establishment of an Earthseed enclave when she and her companions decide to settle on their companion Taylor Franklin Bankole’s property near Mendocino, California. Although some members of the group are skeptical of Earthseed, all share Lauren’s hope for and belief in a community founded on trust and

cooperation. *Parable of the Sower* ends on an uncertain note: The reader does not know if Lauren and her Earthseed community will survive. Lauren cannot offer a solution for all the problems that threaten her and her companions, but she does offer hope.

Both Anyanwu and Lauren epitomize defiance, determination, courage, compromise, and, above all, survival. They strive for freedom, but, given their obstacles, they learn to make advancements through concessions. In the end, Anyanwu accepts her nemesis (and he, in turn, accepts her); while Lauren adapts to her brutal surroundings in spite of her unique physical (dis)ability (in fact, this [dis]ability prevents her from becoming as cruel and violent as the forces that menace her). (Indeed, Lauren's belief in change as a constant and her willingness to adapt to change are the foundational tenets of Earthseed.) In reconceiving power, Butler reconceives the subject: Anyanwu and Lauren learn to forge links with others through acceptance, trust, and cooperation, rather than through domination and intimidation. Their willingness to adapt, to compromise, and to establish connections with others allows them to endure the trying circumstances in which they find themselves. As Ruth Salvaggio astutely observes, "[Butler's] novels are about survival and power, about black women who must face tremendous societal constraints. We might very well expect them to be rebellious. We might expect them to reverse the typical male science-fiction stereotype and replace male tyranny with female tyranny. This does not happen. Though Butler's heroines are dangerous and powerful women, their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny" (Salvaggio 1984, 81).

Cyborgs and Woman of Color Feminism: Difference and Specificity

Through her heroines, Butler challenges and relativizes masculinist notions of power. She redefines power and agency by theorizing a feminist, woman-of-color subject emblematic of Donna Haraway's "cyborg." In fact, in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway upholds Butler as one of a handful of "theorists for cyborgs" (Haraway 1991b, 173). Yet, what is a "cyborg" and what is the relationship between what Haraway terms "cyborg identity" and the subject of a woman of color feminism?

Haraway defines "cyborg" as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (Haraway 1991b, 149). She carefully grounds her concept of the cyborg in the context of women, labor and technology, yet also uses it as a material representation or metaphor for "cyborg identity." "Cyborg identity," according to Haraway, is "a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (174). Cyborgs embody "permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (154).

In other words, “cyborg identity” is based on the concept of constructionism (i.e., anti-essentialism), position, or “place”—as in “one’s place in society” or one’s displacement in/by society. It reconceives of identity (a static and fixed essence) as *position* (within a particular history, narrative, ideology, and/or social system). Because a subject embodies multiple, simultaneous social and subject positions (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, physical ability), it may speak from, see itself in relation to, and/or be forced into (i.e., subjected to) a number of oscillating and often contradictory and incompatible “places.”

Drawing from Chela Sandoval’s 1991 essay “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” Haraway stresses “‘women of colour’ . . . as a cyborg identity” (Haraway 1991b, 174). She defines “women of colour” in opposition to essence (i.e., a stable, unchanging core) and in terms of negation: Women of color are not “women” nor are they “black” or “Chicano” (156). Women of color are “those refused stable membership in the categories of race, sex, or class”: They are displaced by and vacillate between the social categories of gender and race, which as Haraway reminds us, often refer to white women and men of color respectively (155).

One may easily argue that all people—regardless and *because of* race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, physical ability, and so forth—locate themselves and/or are located within, between, and outside multiple social and subject positions. As Haraway notes, “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, *we are cyborgs*” (Haraway 1991b, 150, italics added).¹² However, according to both Sandoval and Haraway, women-of-color subjectivity in particular “constructs a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity” (Haraway 1991b, 155). It does not privilege one social position over another, but recognizes their intersections. As such, woman-of-color subjectivity is, in the words of Norma Alarcón, “a site of multiple voicings” (Alarcón 1990, 365). “Inorganic” and “unnatural,” it exemplifies what Sandoval has termed “differential consciousness”—that is, “a *tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval 1991, 14, italics in original). In other words, women-of-color subjectivity crafts a “political unity without relying on”—but, at the same time, exploiting—“the logic of appropriation, incorporation, and taxonomic identification” (Haraway 1991b, 157).

For example, in the United States, the term “woman of color” forges links between women from distant and disparate locations (both geographic and socioeconomic) by positioning them—and recognizing that they have been positioned—within particular histories of exclusion, oppression and resistance. In her preface to the groundbreaking

anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga reflects on the ties that bind Chicanas and African American women. "It is not a given between us—Chicana and Black—to come to see each other as sisters," she writes in response to a black woman calling her "sister." Echoing Dick's and Suvin's concepts of dysrecognition and estrangement, Moraga exclaims, "I keep wanting to repeat over and over and over again, the pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it" (Moraga 1981, xiv).

In short, Haraway's concept of "cyborg identity" interrogates the stability of social categories, such as "woman," "white," and "black," and exposes them as social "fictions" (i.e., regulatory ideals). Furthermore, it calls for the construction of coalitions based not on "identity" as essence, but on position(s) and affinity (Haraway defines affinity as "related not by blood but by choice" [Haraway 1991b, 155]). Like Haraway's cyborg, Anyanwu and Lauren threaten the stability of social categories and retrace the boundaries of community. In addition, their unique physical qualities (i.e., Anyanwu's shape-changing power and Lauren's hyperempathy) defy the notion of the stable and closed subject as they assume and/or are catapulted into various social and subject positions and as they blur the boundaries of consciousness.

Throughout *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu transforms her body into a variety of life-forms. With each human form, she assumes a different social and subject position (as a different social and subject position is imposed upon her), and, subsequently, she gains (and sometimes loses) a particular worldview. For example, after Anyanwu "wears" the body of a wealthy white man for quite some time, she begins to forget what it is like to "inhabit" a black body. She recalls, "Slaves were passing in front of me all chained, and I was thinking, 'I have to take more sunken gold from the sea, then see the banker about buying the land that adjoins mine. I have to buy some books—medical books, especially to see what doctors are doing now. . . .' I was not seeing the slaves in front of me. I would not have thought I could be oblivious to such a thing. I had been white for too long" (Butler 1980, 211).

In addition, as a white man, Anyanwu marries and falls in love with Denice, a white woman tormented by her ability to see images from the past. When Doro asks why Denice married Anyanwu after she learned that Anyanwu was actually a black woman posing as a white man, Anyanwu tells him, "Because I believed her when she told me what she could do. Because I was not afraid or ridiculing. And because after a while, we started to want each other" (Butler 1980, 218).¹³

By blurring gender categories, Anyanwu challenges what Haraway describes as "the mundane fiction of Man and Woman" (Haraway 1991b, 180). She erases the boundaries of identity and consciousness by embodying various social and subject positions, while

Lauren erases the boundaries of identity and consciousness by experiencing others' physical sensations as if they were her own. For example, when Lauren delivers a blow to a man who has attacked Harry, she strikes herself down. After she regains consciousness and discovers that the intruder is unconscious, but still alive, she decides to kill him immediately, lest she experience his pain. Later, during a gunfight between her group and a gang of paints, Lauren "die[s] with someone else" (Butler 1995, 272). Throughout the fighting and killing, she dies "over and over" as men and women around her are killed (274). Indeed, Lauren's hyperempathy makes her emblematic of the cyborg, for it blurs the boundary that supposedly separates self from other.

"Why should our bodies end at the skin?" Haraway asks as she closes "A Cyborg Manifesto" (Haraway 1991b, 178), thus signaling a shift in focus from embodiment to disembodiment. Haraway elaborates on the tension between embodiment and disembodiment in this essay: "Feminist embodiment . . . is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning" (Haraway 1991a, 22-23). In other words, while Haraway, like Butler, privileges the body in delineating the subject, she does not regard it as an immutable biological given. Rather, the body, for both Haraway and Butler, is, in the words of Rosi Braidotti, "a field of inscription of sociosymbolic codes: it stands for the radical materiality of the subject" (Braidotti 1994, 103). Thus, the body is simultaneously material and discursive. Our conceptions and experiences of it as material are always socially mediated.¹⁴

By occupying multiple social and subject positions and by blurring the boundaries of identity and consciousness, the heroines of *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* question why and when the body should "end at the skin." At the same time, they emphasize the material boundaries that the body imposes on the subject, especially if one is a slave, a mother, or a woman. References to slavery and motherhood permeate both texts. For example, Anyanwu is brought from Africa to Wheatley, New York, where she is made Doro's slave and an incubator for his seed. As in Africa, Anyanwu bears generations of descendants and, eventually, takes the European name Emma because "[s]he had heard that it meant grandmother or ancestress, and this amused her" (Butler 1980, 278). (Incidentally, "Wheatley" may be a reference to Phillis Wheatley, the eighteenth-century African American poet and "ancestress" of African American writers.¹⁵)

Meanwhile, Lauren's hyperempathy is the result of her mother having abused a drug while she was pregnant with her. Furthermore, the majority of Lauren's companions are fugitive and/or former slaves. As they journey north, Lauren refers to her group

as “the crew of a modern underground railroad” and teaches her companions—many of whom are illiterate—to read and write (Butler 1995, 268). Like Harriet Tubman, Lauren disguises herself as a man as she travels, and at one point, she describes Bankole as “look[ing] more than a little like an old picture I used to have of Frederick Douglass” (Butler 1995, 298).

Indeed, the subjects (i.e., topics) of *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* are simultaneously recognizable and unfamiliar: Both novels are about upheaval, migration and what Carole Boyce Davies terms “re-mem-bering,” for both speak of the past and present of African Americans in the New World. Davies argues that the “need to reconnect and re-member . . . has been a central impulse in the structuring of Black thought” in the Americas. Through their narratives, African Americans have sought reconnection, “[f]rom the ‘flying back’ stories which originated in slavery to the ‘Back to Africa’ movements of Garvey and those before him, to the Pan-Africanist activity of people like Du Bois and C. L. R. James”¹⁶ (Davies 1994, 14, 18). In many ways, *Wild Seed* is an origin, flying back and flying forward story, while *Parable of the Sower* chronicles a flight to the north, as well as a shift from the urban to the rural. Both novels are located within specific African American historical narratives even as they transgresses “the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language, corporeality and restricted consciousness in order to make reconnections and mark or name gaps and absences” (17).

In addition to drawing connections between the past and the present, the present and the future, and Africa and the Americas, *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* attempt to show the ties that bind the peoples of the New World. Butler does not elide difference but explores it: Her subjects (i.e., agents) confront one another in the rich and contested spaces where differences intersect. In all of her novels, Butler explicitly identifies the race and/or ethnicity of the actors, many of whom are persons of color. In a 1986 interview, she stated, “There are always blacks in the novels I write and whites. In *Quasar* there is a Japanese man and a Mexican woman. In the one I’m working on now there is a Chinese man and a lot of different people are lumped together” (Beal 1986, 16–17). Yet, rather than showcasing a heterogeneous cast of characters simply for the sake of superficial color, Butler explores race and difference as instruments of power. For instance, in *Parable of the Sower*, racial and ethnic differences threaten to tear Lauren’s group apart. The group must learn to transform its diversity into a strength, rather than rendering it a weakness.

In the same interview, Butler noted that the popular 1977 science-fiction film *Star Wars* “shows every kind of alien, but there is only one kind of human—white ones; no black people were shown. There are no non-whites at all and where are they?” (Beal

1986, 17–18). She argued that “non-whites” in much mainstream science fiction are simultaneously represented and substituted by the figure of the alien. Recalling a conversation with the editor of a science-fiction magazine, she elaborated:

He said that he didn't think that blacks should be included in science fiction stories because they changed the character of the stories; that if you put in a black, all of a sudden the focus is on this person. He stated that if you were going to write about some sort of racial problem, that would be absolutely the only reason he could see for including a black.

He went on to say that well, perhaps you could use an alien instead and get rid of all this messiness and all those people that we don't want to deal with. It reflected his view of black people as being other. (18)

Through her science fiction, Butler challenges “natural” and/or “commonplace” ideas that describe, circumscribe, and/or *elide* the racialized and gendered subject as “other.” To the editor who insisted that black people be excluded from science fiction, black people are not only overtly prohibited from the genre, they are simply not allowed to exist within it (in the same way that women of color are “those refused stable membership in categories of race, sex or class,” as Haraway writes [1991b, 155]). In distinguishing prohibition from elision, Judith Butler observes, “[O]ppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects—objects, we might call them—who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law” (J. Butler 1991, 20). Indeed, the “object”—that is, that which is not simply prohibited but denied altogether—is the *subject* of Octavia E. Butler's science fiction.

Abjection, Aliens and *Atravesados* in *Borderlands/La Frontera*
As in Butler's science fiction, the “alien” is the subject of Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 manifesto *Borderlands / La Frontera*. Anzaldúa writes as a lesbian, feminist Chicana from rural southern Texas and locates her text in the Borderlands—namely, the place where two or more worlds clash: where Anglo America collides with Latin America, the heterosexual confronts the queer, and the colonizer meets the colonized. She describes the U.S.–Mexico border as “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.” Yet, “before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture,” she adds. Like Butler's science-fiction landscapes, the Borderlands, according to Anzaldúa, is a site of complexity, heterogeneity, flux, exchange, struggle, and, above all, contradiction and ambiguity. It is home to the *mestiza* (i.e., the mixed race), “[t]he prohibited and [the]

forbidden." She writes, "*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). To "[g]ringos in the U.S. Southwest," Anzaldúa writes, the inhabitants of the Borderlands are "transgressors"; they are "aliens" (3).

Not only is *Borderlands / La Frontera* about *mestizaje* (i.e., the blurring of racial categories), it is also a symbolic example of *mestizaje*. The text combines poetry, prose, personal testimony, and historical narrative. Moving between "standard" (i.e., middle-class Anglo-American English), various forms of Spanish (e.g., "proper" Castilian, "standard" Mexican, Chicana/o, and Tex-Mex), "Spanglish," Caló (i.e., "street speech") and Nahuatl, Anzaldúa attempts to articulate the complex history of conflict in the Borderlands and a theory of what she terms "an 'alien' consciousness . . . a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de la mujer*" (a woman's consciousness) (Anzaldúa 1987, 77).

Anzaldúa locates her theory of "'alien' consciousness" in the history of struggle in and over the Borderlands. She reminds her readers that, after the U.S.–Mexico War, the United States splintered Mexico when it seized its northernmost region (the area composed of the present-day states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma) and, thus, split a people in two: "[t]he border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo" (Anzaldúa 1987, 7).

In theorizing "alien" consciousness, Anzaldúa draws a parallel between the splitting of the land and the splitting of the racialized, sexualized, and colonized subject (i.e., the queer *india / mestiza*) for whom it is and was home. "The *Gringo*, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it," she charges (Anzaldúa 1987, 7). "*Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desuñados, destroncados, destripados*—we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history" (Anzaldúa 1987, 7–8). Conflating the land with her own body, she describes the U.S.–Mexico border as a "1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a pueblo, a culture / running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits me / *me raja me raja*" (Anzaldúa 1987, 2).

Anzaldúa stresses that the contest for property, profit, and cultural and political dominance in the Borderlands has split not only the land but the queer *mestiza*, too. It has alienated her from her history, her home, her flesh, and "her mother culture" (Anzaldúa 1987, 20). In short, she claims that this history of violence and fragmentation has severed the queer *mestiza* from her past.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon eloquently asserts, "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content." He explains that, in addition to grafting itself onto the colonized subject's consciousness, colonization "turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon 1963, 170). Like those of Octavia Butler, and many other postcolonial and/or diasporic cultural workers, Anzaldúa's project is one of recovery and "rememory." Her theory of "alien" consciousness simultaneously attempts to excavate and to produce what Stuart Hall has carefully defined as "cultural identity" (Hall 1990, 223). For Anzaldúa, excavating the "mother culture" and producing an "alien" consciousness begins with undoing the legacies of patriarchy, homophobia, and European imperialism in the New World.

Anzaldúa argues that the combination of misogyny, homophobia and white supremacy has fragmented the queer *mestiza* by infecting her with an insidious and debilitating sense of self-hatred and shame. This sense of self-hatred and shame presses the queer *mestiza* to doubt, fear, and deny what Anzaldúa terms "the Indian woman in [her]" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22). Confronting the internalization of "the standards of the dominant culture" (Anzaldúa 1987, 49), she claims that "[w]e, *indias y mestizas*, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on-us" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22).

Borderlands / La Frontera is a rejection of patriarchy and homophobia (and their apparatuses, such as Protestantism and Catholicism, which Anzaldúa insists "encourage fear and distrust of life and . . . the body . . . [and] a split between the body and the spirit" [Anzaldúa 1987, 37]). It is a rejection of the white supremacy of European imperialisms (both Spanish and Anglo-American), and of the internalization—or, as Fanon puts it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "epidermalization" (Fanon 1967, 11)—of racial inferiority. Moreover, *Borderlands / La Frontera* is a rejection of Enlightenment epistemology—what Anzaldúa terms "white rationality"—that is, "their reality, the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is . . . the consciousness of duality" (Anzaldúa 1987, 36–37). According to Anzaldúa, "the consciousness of duality" (e.g., the subject-object dichotomy) not only manufactures "'official' reality" and regulates understanding, but is also "the root of all violence":

In trying to become "objective," Western culture made "objects" of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing "touch" with them. . . . Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality.

Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the *india* and the *mestiza*. (Anzaldúa 1987, 37)

For Anzaldúa, the consciousness of duality constitutes reason, which follows what feminist philosopher Maria Lugones terms “the logic of purity” (Lugones 1994, 463). “[T]he logic of purity” violently splits the world into ontological and epistemological binarisms—or what Lugones calls “a complex series of fictions” (Lugones 1994, 463), such as subject and object, insider and outsider, man and woman, good and evil, and culture and nature. It attempts “to control the multiplicity of people and things [and] attains satisfaction through exercises in split separation” (Lugones 1994, 464). In Anzaldúa’s words, it is “an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better” (Anzaldúa 1987, 19).

Borderlands / La Frontera is an attempt to defy the boundaries of what Lugones calls “unidimensionality”; it is an attempt to transcend the consciousness of duality (i.e., reason) and “its normative aspect . . . the unified subject” (Lugones 1994, 465). In lieu of the consciousness of duality, Anzaldúa proposes an alternative epistemology: “alien” consciousness. Anzaldúa defines alien consciousness as and through what she terms “the Coatlicue state.” Coatlicue, the part-human, part-animal Mesoamerican goddess of fertility, functions as the embodiment of this consciousness.¹⁷ The Coatlicue “state”—which Alarcón argues is actually a process—is constituted by the act of being/becoming simultaneous subject and object (Alarcón 1990a). “Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she,” Anzaldúa writes. “These seemingly contradictory aspects—the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and ‘seeing through’ an experience” come together to form “alien” consciousness (Anzaldúa 1987, 42).

Just as Anyanwu’s shape-changing ability and Lauren’s hyperempathy dissolve the boundary between self and other, alien consciousness “break[s] down the subject-object duality that keeps [the queer *mestiza* subject] a prisoner.” The queer *mestiza* must “show in the flesh and through images in her work how duality is transcended,” Anzaldúa proclaims (Anzaldúa 1987, 80). Indeed, the queer *mestiza*’s ambiguous, contradictory, and shifting social position(s) cannot be contained within the boundaries of duality. After all, the queer *mestiza* is “both male and female”; therefore, s/he represents a *third* gender—something other than and/or in addition to male and female (19). An amalgamation of Europeans, indigenous Americans, and Africans in the New World, s/he is the descendant of both colonizer and colonized—hence, “per” vexed genealogical relationship to the history of oppression.¹⁸ What’s more, s/he is neither “Mexican” nor full-fledged “American.” As such, the queer *mestiza* cannot claim sexual, racial, or cultural purity and is located at the juncture “where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers.

In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness” (79–80).

Thus, Anzaldúa, like Haraway, celebrates “a subjectivity that’s hybridized, mixed, and plural, rather than split” (Penley and Ross 1991, 10). In this 1991 interview, Haraway conceded that, in understanding the dynamics of racism, “you can’t work without a conception of splitting and deferring and substituting,” yet added, “I’m suspicious of the fact that in our accounts of both race and sex, each has to proceed one at a time, using a similar technology to do it” (Penley and Ross 1991, 11). In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Anzaldúa does not split race from sex; they are not isolated from one another and hierarchized. Rather, she synthesizes them, along with gender, class, and sexuality, in theorizing a queer *mestiza* subject.

Because Anzaldúa’s queer *mestiza* subject is “caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits,” s/he is “[a]lienated from her mother culture, and ‘alien’ in the dominant culture” (Anzaldúa 1987, 20). Alienation, alienization (i.e., other-ization, objectification), and what Anzaldúa calls “homophobia” (i.e., “homophobia,” in the conventional sense of the word, and “homophobia” meaning the “[f]ear of going home . . . [a]nd of not being taken in” [20]) force the queer *mestiza* subject to construct new homes and new families. Like Butler’s heroines, Anzaldúa’s queer *mestiza* does not create community based on blood or essence. Instead, s/he cultivates links with others based on position and affinity. In the words of Alarcón, s/he “mak[es] familia from scratch” (Alarcón 1988, 147).

The queer *mestiza* subject’s alliances simultaneously exceed and emphasize nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, and language. Highlighting the various social or subject categories that she occupies and that have been imposed on her (and echoing Virginia Woolf), Anzaldúa proclaims, “As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races)” (Anzaldúa 1987, 80). Indeed, the *mestiza* subject’s new communities—mixtures of diverse peoples from multiple and distant corners of the globe—hinge upon the queer subject. Eliding any differences and divisions between and among gay men and lesbian women and envisioning a utopian global community of “homosexuals,” Anzaldúa asserts that “homosexuals” are the “supreme crossers of cultures” and that “strong bonds” link “the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, [and] Latino . . . with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet” (84). According to Anzaldúa, the queer subject transgresses the boundaries of not only gender and sexual-

ity, but space and time: “We [queers] come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites”—and, finally—“with *extraterrestrials*” (84–85, italics added).

To my knowledge, few critics have scrutinized Anzaldúa’s assertion that queer subjects connect different racial and national groups with “extraterrestrials.” (Despite the large body of criticism on *Borderlands / La Frontera*, I do not think that the above passage has been quoted in a critical work.) One may wonder if Anzaldúa’s “extraterrestrial” is literal or metaphoric. I believe that it is both. Anzaldúa turns to the alien qua extraterrestrial and “alien” qua outsider as embodiments of difference and deviance. Furthermore, like Octavia Butler, she transforms the “alien” from abject to subject and, in doing so, redefines the subject. For example, in her poem, “Interface,” Anzaldúa recounts a love affair between a human being and an ethereal, otherworldly creature named Leyla. Leyla is “pulsing color, pure sound, bodiless” (Anzaldúa 1987, 30). She (even though Leyla lacks a body, the narrator refers to “her” in the feminine) and her corporal lover meet at “the interface”: “the border between / the physical world / and hers” (i.e., Leyla’s world) (23–25). Rather than communicating with one another with speech, the lovers silently exchange thoughts. Eventually, Leyla’s love for the narrator intensifies and she becomes “skin and bone” and acquires speech (156). “Soon Leyla could pass, / go for milk at the bodega, count change” (151–152). The poem concludes when the narrator takes Leyla home to Texas for Christmas and Leyla seems to “pass” as a lesbian: “Is she a lez, my brothers asked. / I said, No, just an alien. / Leyla laughed” (93–95).

“Interface” may be read as both science fiction and a coming-out narrative. Leyla may be an alien qua extraterrestrial (i.e., a literal alien) and/or an “alien” qua lesbian (i.e., a metaphorical “alien”). She may be the narrator’s lover and/or she may represent the narrator (e.g., the queer who comes out and flourishes). Like *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*, “Interface” reconceives the abject and/or object as subject without reproducing or replicating oppressive power relations. And, like *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*, it reconceives communication and love.¹⁹

Although many readers probably would not consider *Borderlands / La Frontera* an example of science fiction, it has much in common with *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*. Both Anzaldúa and Butler expose ideology; they denaturalize and relativize fictions that are often upheld as facts. Moreover, they accomplish this via the figure of the cyborg: the “alien,” the homeless, the one who passes, negotiates, and concedes, the prohibited, the hybrid, the queer, and/or the colonized.

Through the figure of the cyborg, Anzaldúa and Butler also theorize a woman-of-color feminism. For Butler, the cyborg is the raced and gendered subject; for Anzaldúa s/he is also queer. Occupying a multiplicity of social locations, the queer woman of color is able to forge alliances across differences. However, at the same time, she is unable to escape history and, as I argue below, essence. Butler's black heroines are located within specific African American narratives of slavery, resistance, and migration (to and through the New World), while Anzaldúa's queer *mestiza* subject is located in the history of struggle along and over the U.S.–Mexico border, between racist Americans and the racialized others who inhabit the United States, and within the Chicano-Mexican culture. Indeed, their subjects are cyborgs because they interrogate the stability of social categories, such as “woman,” “American,” and “human,” and because they exemplify the construction of coalitions based on position and affinity, as opposed to identity and essence. However, Butler's black heroines and Anzaldúa's queer *mestiza* subject differ from a more generic cyborg because they also emphasize very particular New World histories (African American and Chicana, respectively).

As this chapter demonstrates, I find Haraway's concept of the cyborg valuable for theorizing and illuminating feminism for, by, and about women of color. In general, feminism for, by, and about women of color emphasizes position, plurality, constructedness, and coalition. At the same time, it is grounded in difference and specificity (e.g., the specificity of a particular time, place, body, community, or narrative). Haraway emphasizes that the term “[wo]man of colour” . . . constructs a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference, and *specificity*” (Haraway 1991b, 155; italics added). Nonetheless, Paula M. L. Moya argues that Haraway's concept of “cyborg identity” denies women of color—in particular, Chicanas—the specificity of social location. The “porosity and polysemy of the category ‘cyborg,’ in effect, leaves no criteria to determine who might *not* be a cyborg,” she asserts (Moya 1997, 131, italics original). Moya charges that “[b]y freeing herself of the obligation to ground identity in social location, Haraway is able to arrogate the meaning of the term ‘women of color.’ With this misappropriation, Haraway authorizes herself to speak for actual women of color, to dismiss our own interpretations of our experiences of oppression, our ‘need to root politics in identification,’ and even our identities” (132).

While the queer *mestiza* subject has a complicated and vexed relationship to biological, cultural, and historical origins, Anzaldúa is still careful to root “per” in a “politics of identification”—in particular, with that of—to draw from the title of Norma Alarcón's essay—“*The* Native Woman” (Alarcón 1990a, italics added). Interestingly, some scholars have criticized Anzaldúa for essentializing the queer *mestiza* subject at the expense of Native American women.²⁰ After all, Anzaldúa's concept of “*mestiza* con-

sciousness” revolves around the figure of a seemingly static, monolithic Native American woman. Throughout *Borderlands / La Frontera*, she refers to “the Indian woman in me” (Anzaldúa 1987, 22), “her core self, her dark Indian self” (43), and “the mystery of the Origin” (49).

Although Anzaldúa’s concept of *mestiza* consciousness emphasizes positionality, I find it difficult to argue that, at times, she does not essentialize. Likewise, Octavia Butler relies on an essential identity in many of her works, including *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*. Despite Anyanwu’s shape-changing ability, she is still “Anyanwu,” a seventeenth-century Igbo woman. Likewise, despite Lauren’s hyperempathy, she is still “Lauren,” a twenty-first-century black American teenager. After she is done experiencing another’s feelings, she goes back to being her “old” self.

Rather than ignoring Anzaldúa’s and Butler’s essentializing tactics, I wish to underscore them here. Regarding questions pertaining to (and accusations of) essentialisms, Diana Fuss reminds us, “The question we should be asking is not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore “bad”)?’ but rather ‘if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*’” (xi, italics original). If, as Fuss argues, constructionism, essentialism’s putative antithesis, “really operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism,” then Octavia Butler’s and Gloria Anzaldúa’s use of positionality is actually a “more sophisticated form of essentialism” (Fuss 1989, xii). In speaking *as* a “black woman” or *as* a “Chicana,” Butler and Anzaldúa claim subject positions that are, to draw from “A Cyborg Manifesto,” *not* those of white women or Chicanos respectively. The negative, opposite, or inverse of an essential identity, such as “(white) woman” or “Chicano,” is itself an essence. As a means of producing raced and gendered speaking subjects and forging alliances between those who are not necessarily obviously connected (and, thus, retracing the boundaries of community and identity), Butler and Anzaldúa deploy essence by emphasizing a particular social or subject position (e.g., Butler always identifies the race, ethnicity, and gender of her characters and Anzaldúa stresses “homosexuality” in delineating a global, queer community). According to Gayatri Spivak, “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like *woman* or *worker* or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized” (Spivak 1993, 3). Butler’s and Anzaldúa’s texts illustrate that the strategic deployment of essence is necessary for imagining and mobilizing new subjects and new communities, such as “woman of color,” “women of color,” “home,” and “family.”

The tension between affinity and essence, and between plurality and specificity in the work of Anzaldúa and Butler, highlights a contradiction of woman-of-color subjectivity and feminism: The histories of racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and homophobia have rendered women of color abject, yet, via history, women of color must claim some

sort of position in order transform themselves into (speaking) subjects (without replicating the regime[s] that silenced them). As Haraway points out, history, like origin stories, functions as a "potent myth" (Haraway 1991b, 151). Its potency is precisely what enables women-of-color writers, like Butler and Anzaldúa, to tell African American and Chicana stories, respectively, and to theorize feminism(s) by, for, and about women of color.

Conclusion

As *Borderlands / La Frontera* illustrates, one need not turn to texts designated "science fiction" to read about "aliens." In fact, one need only glance at a mainstream American newspaper, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, and chances are, one will find stories about alien invasion and alien conspiracies to sabotage American culture and society. Of course, I am referring to anti-immigrant discourse and xenophobia in the United States. As the official term, "illegal alien" renders many of the men, women and children who enter the United States without papers ("passports") criminal outsiders and transforms them into dangerous monsters. Just as Butler and Anzaldúa equate the "alien" with the "other," Haraway notes that "[m]onsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (Haraway 1991b, 180).

Indeed, if science fiction is defined in terms of dysrecognition and estrangement, then the histories of many communities of color in the United States, and of the colonized and diasporic peoples of the (aptly named) "New World," are reminiscent of a sci-fi plot. Regarding the history of African Americans, Mark Dery writes, "African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)" (Dery 1993, 736).

Similarly, beginning in 1492, the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas found themselves face-to-face with "alien" invaders who arrived in large ships and who brought with them strange and powerful weapons, as well as new diseases. Many of the alien invaders colonized, slaughtered, enslaved, and impregnated the indigenous inhabitants—thus decimating the original population and giving birth to a new hybrid (i.e., *mestiza/o*) people. Furthermore, the alien invaders established their own institutions, such as governments, hospitals, churches and schools, which, ironically, rendered the indigenous inhabitants "alien" in their own homeland. Both enslaved Africans, and the indigenous inhabitants of the "New World" found themselves veritable "strangers in a strange land" (to draw from the title of Robert Heinlein's 1961 science-fiction novel).

Thus, it is not surprising that much of the cultural production of New World peoples draws from the iconography of space, science, and technology. Numerous writers, artists, and musicians have appropriated a genre that many have considered the exclusive domain of middle-class, ostensibly straight, white men and boys interested in “hard” science—a genre that has often celebrated Western imperialism and empiricism—and have transformed it into a creative and highly politicized space for the articulation of their pasts, presents, and futures. As Octavia Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa have illustrated, science fiction is more than mere escapism. It provides the “aliens” and passport-less of the New World with the opportunity to narrate histories of colonialism, conquest, and resistance; to explore alternative epistemologies and ontologies (and all their contradictions); and, subsequently, to redefine the boundaries of subject and community.

Notes

1. “The Comet” can be found in Thomas 2000. DJ Spooky’s (a.k.a. Paul D. Miller’s) futuristic works include *Necropolis: The Dialogic Project* (1995), *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (1996), and *Riddim Warfare* (1998).
2. See, for example, Walter Mosley’s novel *Blue Light* (1998) and the front and back covers of Earth Wind & Fire’s 1977 album *All ’n All*, which feature Egyptian pyramids and futuristic pyramidlike structures, respectively.
3. “Afrofuturist Dreams: Recasting Race, Recasting Technoculture” consisted of presentations by Ron Eglash, Nalo Hopkinson, Alondra Nelson, and Kalí Tal. It took place at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association on October 13, 2000, in Detroit, Michigan. For more information on Afrofuturist cultural production, log on to < <http://www.afrofuturism.net/> >.
4. Since Delany’s 1993 interview, the list of black science fiction writers has grown. In 1998, Walter Mosley published *Blue Light*, a science fiction novel. The same year, Nalo Hopkinson published *Brown Girl in the Ring*, and, most recently, she has published *Midnight Robber* (2000). While she is not an “American” in the imperialist and nationalist sense, Hopkinson, a native of Jamaica and resident of Canada, is an American in the hemispheric sense. I also add George Schuyler, author of *Black No More* (1989, originally published in 1931) and *Black Empire* (1991, serialized from 1936 to 1938), to the list of black science-fiction writers. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), edited by Sheree R. Thomas, features science fiction, fantasy, and critical essays by thirty African American writers, including Amiri Baraka, Derrick Bell, Charles W. Chestnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jewelle Gomez, and Ishmael Reed.
5. See, for example, Aldiss 1973, Aldiss and Wingrove 1986, Botting 1991, Botting 1995, Broderick 1995, Donawerth 1997, Gunn 1998, Lefanu 1988, Sargent 1974, Sargent 1995a, b, and Suvin 1979.

6. In general, "soft" science fiction refers to science fiction that emphasizes the social and psychological. "Hard" science fiction, with all of the masculine connotations related to the adjective hard, refers to science fiction that supposedly concerns itself with science and technology.
7. See Barr 1987, Barr 1993, Donawerth 1997, Gubar 1980, Lefanu 1988, McIntyre and Anderson 1976, Pearson 1990, Rosinsky 1984, Wolmark 1986, Wood 1978–1979 and Sargent's *Woman of Wonder* series (1974, 1995a, b) regarding science fiction by women writers. See also *Science-Fiction Studies*' special issues on science fiction by women (1980 and 1990).
8. I draw my definition of ideology from Althusser (1971).
9. I have drawn this quote from an unpublished interview quoted in Salvaggio 1986.
10. See, for example, Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, which consists of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).
11. In this chapter, I quote from the 1995 version of *Parable of the Sower*, published by The Women's Press of London.
12. In a 1991 interview conducted by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, Haraway revised her statement "We are all . . . cyborgs." "If I were rewriting those sections of the [1985 version of the] Cyborg Manifesto I'd be much more careful about describing who counts as a 'we,' in the statement, 'We are all cyborgs,'" she stated. "I would also be much more careful to point out that those are subject positions for people in certain regions of transnational systems of production that do not easily figure the situations of other people in the system." Rather than imposing the label "cyborg" in what she termed an "imperializing" manner on Third World women laborers, Haraway elaborated, "I think what I would want is more of a family of displaced figures, of which the cyborg is one, and then to ask how the cyborg makes connections with these other nonoriginal people (cyborgs *are* nonoriginal people) who are multiply displaced" (Penley and Ross 1991, 12–13, italics in original).
13. In Penley and Ross's interview with her, Haraway lamented that Butler "constantly reproduces heterosexuality even in her polygendered species" (Penley and Ross 1991, 12). While Anyanwu and Denice's relationship reproduces heterosexuality (Anyanwu has assumed a male body), it nonetheless may be read as a lesbian relationship.
14. See Stone 1991 for a discussion of the tension of embodiment and disembodiment in cyberculture and feminist theories of cyberculture.
15. Wheatley, a native of West Africa, was a slave in New England in the eighteenth century. In the early 1770s, she began publishing elegies and poems, which some scholars regard as the earliest African American literary texts. See, for example, Gates and McKay 1997.
16. Quotation marks appear in Davies's text.
17. Incidentally, the Mexican artist, Diego Rivera, portrays Coatlicue as a cyborg (as part-human, part-machine) in his 1939 mural *Pan-American Unity*.

18. I draw the term "per" from Marge Piercy's 1976 science-fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*. "Per" is both objective and possessive pronoun, yet unlike "him," "his" or "her(s)" it does not produce and articulate gender. Even though she asserts that the queer *mestiza* is both male and female, Anzaldúa refers to "her" in the feminine.
19. I am grateful to Norma Alarcón for referring me to "Interface."
20. See Alarcón 1994 and Yarbrow-Bejarano 1994 regarding charges that Anzaldúa essentializes queer *mestiza* subjectivity at the expense of Native American women in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

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