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Author(s): Jasmine H. Wade

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Embracing the Sapphire: Black Women's Rage in Speculative Fiction

Jasmine H. Wade

"Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival."

—Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,"

"If this what you truly want. I can wear her skin over mine. Her hair, over mine, her hands as gloves, her teeth as confetti, her scalp a cap, her sternum, my bedazzled cane. We can pose for a photograph, all three of us, immortalized. You and your perfect girl. . . . Why can't you see me? Everyone else can."

—Beyoncé Knowles, *Lemonade*

Representations of the Sapphire, the Angry Black Woman, are peppered throughout the cultural history of the United States. In television and film, there was the original Sapphire: Sapphire Stevens on *Amos and Andy* (though the stereotype predates her). Other examples include Pam James on *Martin*, Coffy, and Terri from *Barbershop*. Reality shows and tabloid talk shows, like *The Jerry Springer Show*, reinforced the stereotype of the angry black woman (Pilgrim). Within the stereotype, the Black woman's anger is bitter, irrational, destructive, and emasculating. In recent years, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, gymnast Gabby Douglas, and tennis star Serena Williams have all been accused of unnecessary aggression and anger. Even Michelle Obama fought to shake off the label of Sapphire. Throughout history, the Sapphire is presented as a woman whose anger is destructive to her family and her country. The Sapphire persists as a stereotype that presents Black women as pathological "instrument[s] of castration" (Spillers 74). The archetype's primary purpose is to silence and invisibilize Black women. The epigraphs included at the start of this piece suggest embracing an inner monstrosity in order to avoid a sentence of invisibility. In both, rage is an important catalyst in seizing one's monstrous side. In this essay, I argue that Black women are born in rage, which is to say Black women's rage is such a fundamental

part of us¹ that processing it can trigger modes of metamorphosis.² In literature and film, the Angry Black Woman or Sapphire figure has been employed as a means of dehumanization. Black women are often instructed from girlhood to resist appearing angry or at least to be aware of appearing angry. Black speculative fiction in some cases opens the door to subvert this norm and embrace the Sapphire in all her power. This essay explores two examples of Black speculative fiction in which the Sapphire is embraced and Black women's rage is seen as a force of survival. In Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* (a graphic novel), Dr. Josephine Baker fights against processes of dehumanization by expressing a monstrous rage with an appetite for destructive creation to protect herself and her family. In Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* (a horror television show), Ruby Baptiste's rage against white supremacy is tangled up in her use of respectability as a defense mechanism. That is, until she gets a taste of magic and white privilege. In both speculative works, Black women express their rage and transform into otherly human forms.

The close reading I perform in this essay relies on a theoretical framework that braids theories of rage by Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter. Together, these Black feminist theorists support my claim that Black women are born in rage as a result of historical and ongoing trauma. What might it mean to think of Black women's rage as not only affective but also onto-epistemic through Sylvia Wynter's conception of sociogeny and Hortense Spiller's conception of the flesh? What does Black women's rage have to do with self-definition as a project of Black feminism? My exploration of these questions brings me to the idea of metamorphosis, in which new self-definitions offer different conceptions of what it means to be human. A new human, as Wynter has suggested, is important not only for understanding the situations of Black women, particularly in the United States but also throughout the diaspora, but also for plotting trajectories for Black women's survival (along with their kin).

I bring together rage, science fiction, and Black feminist theories as a way of showing how imagination allows for important epistemic movement. Misha Green and Victor LaValle present new ways of being, ways that suggest paths forward after embracing the Sapphire. Considering Black women's use of anger in historical and contemporary social and political spaces as well as the use of the Sapphire to silence Black women, theorizing Black women's rage in fiction may help add to our understanding of Black life in reality.

¹ Because I am a Black woman, throughout this essay I will sometimes refer to Black women in the first person plural. This is in keeping with Black feminism's tradition of blending the personal and the academic.

² The idea of Black women born in rage is inspired partly by Kiese Laymon's statement that Black boys are born on parole in the essay "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America."

Overview of *Destroyer* and *Lovecraft Country*

Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* features Dr. Josephine Baker, a Black woman who has perfected the science of Dr. Victor Frankenstein and brought her son, Akai, back from the dead. Akai was murdered by Chicago police when he was twelve years old. Before Akai's birth, Josephine worked in a lab run by the Director, a white woman who wanted to perfect Frankenstein's research for a select few. She worked to turn immortality into a "natural resource" and use it to gain ultimate power over the world. Josephine left the lab when she became pregnant with Akai because the Director pushed her out. When Josephine left, she left not only her job but also Pliers, her husband who chose to stay loyal to the Director. Without Josephine at the lab, Pliers subjects himself to an experiment where he merges with a machine and becomes a cyborg known as The Bride. In the present-day narrative, Frankenstein's monster makes his way to the United States causing unintentional destruction along the way. As the Director lures the monster in, she sends two agents to bring Josephine back to complete their work. Those two agents are the first to meet Akai and see how he can manipulate matter and energy. Through a violent exchange, Josephine and Akai escape the agents and head to the lab on their own terms. Josephine reveals Akai is not fully human but is a mixture of human matter, nanobots, and other material. The violence escalates when the monster turns on Akai and Josephine at the lab. Akai kills the monster but not before the monster kills Josephine. Soon after, Josephine reveals she has uploaded her consciousness to Akai's system, so she can continue to be with him always.

Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* is set in the 1950s, primarily in Chicago. The protagonist, Atticus Freeman, works with his friend Letitia Lewis and his family members to protect themselves from a magical whites-only fraternity. Ruby Baptiste, the focus of this essay, is a secondary character. She is Letitia's sister and wants, more than anything, to get a job at Marshall Field and Company, a high-end department store. Even though Ruby has applied several times, Marshall Field's has not hired her because they have a policy against hiring Black people. However, one day when Ruby goes into the store, she finds they have hired Tamara, a Black woman. She is devastated because she knows the store will not hire more than one Black person. While she is soothing her sorrows at a local bar, Ruby meets William, a white man with access to magic. William shows Ruby his power by transforming her into a white woman. Her transformation does more than change her skin; she becomes a different person. The potion is temporary, and Ruby has to keep drinking it in order to stay in the white skin. Ruby explores having white privilege and gets a job as an assistant manager at Marshall Field's. She is harsh to Tamara until she sees the manager, a white man, try to force himself on Tamara after work. Ruby goes to the manager the next day as a white woman and pretends

to seduce him. Then, she begins to beat him as the white skin falls on the ground in a bloody heap around her. She remains a Black woman after that.

Born in Rage

Black women are born in rage. I use the term rage instead of anger to signify a systemic accumulation of anger across space and time that runs parallel to the accumulation of hatred apparent in structural racism. Black women are born in rage because the hatred and the systems that produce the resulting anger are well underway each time a baby Black girl is born. In "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," Audre Lorde said, "Every Black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers" (145). We are born and live along that "wide curve" of rage that begins before us and continues after us. Lorde underscores the long-standing and intersectional angers within Black women. This rage, the accumulation of multiple angers, exists in her both as a conscious emotion and as a dynamic and ongoing state of existence. It can emerge as a result of multiple catalysts over time or can also point to structures. This accumulation is not inherently confined to an individual life. The rage is a natural byproduct of "metabolizing hatred like a daily bread" not just in our own lifetimes but from the lifetimes of mothers and othermothers before us (152). This rage is relational and is the direct result of a series of behaviors and conditions.

Lorde argues for a dialectic between the hatred embedded in systemic racism, Black women, and Black women's anger (146). The cruelty and harm inherent in that hatred forms an anger as a fundamental part of Black women's existence. Lorde's use of the word "ancient" to describe Black women's anger is indicative of how the angers extend vertically through generations. The "unexpressed" suggests not only a horizontal rippling of these angers in Black communities but also the illegibility of the Black woman's anger in what is currently the United States. Like other Black feminist theorists, I do not feel or imagine Black women's rage as inherently destructive.³ It is a force that prompts action that is likely a combination of destruction and empowerment (Jordan-Zachery 65; Luberecki).

Lorde's approach to anger blends affect and ontology, and Hortense Spillers' epistemological theories approach Black women's rage from a different point. Lorde offers that anger has material consequences and exists within one's experiences with their feelings. When Lorde tells the story about being young and feeling the hateful glare of a white woman on a bus, the white woman has a feeling (hatred) in response to seeing Lorde, and Lorde has feelings (shame, anger) in response to

³ Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Bettina Judd are just a few of the theorists who inform my thoughts on rage.

the white woman's hatred (147-48). This is her dialectic. Spillers' conception of the flesh points to another potential space where Black women's rage may also exist. "Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. . . . If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard" (Spillers 67). The concept of the flesh allows me to conceive of Black women's rage as part of the Black woman's primary narrative, which was constituted in the Middle Passage. The flesh precedes the body temporally and conceptually; it is a fundamental element "in the vein of the classical quadfecta of earth, wind, (water,) and fire" (Weheliye 44).

Spillers' vocabulary of the flesh facilitates an understanding of the rage of Black women when considered alongside Lorde. Spillers' conception of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" connects to Lorde's hatred dialectic. "These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers 67). One interpretation of these markings is that they are the racist and sexist hatred that Lorde speaks of. This manifests as a rage whose justification is "hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color." The narrative around the Sapphire does the discursive work of obscuring the truth of Black women's rage: that Black women's rage is not only justifiable, it is part of a fundamental element (the hieroglyphs that are passed on from generation to generation). Through this lens, rage is a fugitive maneuver that points toward liberatory paths. With rage comes a refusal of or unruliness toward the hatred. Rage can create a path to a life with more agency, one that feels better because the rage prompts a Black woman to uncover, decipher, and move against the hieroglyphics.

Dr. Josephine Baker and Ruby Baptiste exemplify the intertwining of destruction and empowerment as they process their rage and reach metamorphosis. Josephine's impulse toward destruction is a direct response to the powerlessness that results from a lifetime under white supremacy. Her relationship to power is complex; Josephine is highly educated and before the present-day narrative, she worked as a top scientist in a well-funded, innovative lab. As long as she did her work and gave her all to the lab, the Director (the antagonist) channeled power in the form of technology and funds through Josephine. But when Josephine became pregnant with Akai and needed to turn her attention to her growing family, the Director pushed her out of the organization. In other words, Josephine's access to power was contingent on her complete dedication to the Director. When the Director shares her plans to harness the power of immortality, she notes that inequality has always been fundamental to the survival of humanity. "The purpose

of most humans, since the dawn of time, has been one thing only. *Cheap labor*. Nobility needed things and the rest of us existed only to provide" (LaValle Chapter 4, emphasis in original). The Director plans to build on that hierarchal model, using Frankenstein's monster, to turn a select few into a class of gods.

The Director's desire to claim power and Akai's murder mirror each other in the way white supremacy limits and harms Josephine—in one instance because of her womanhood and in the other because of her Blackness. This is the hatred Audre Lorde talked about. It is the desire within whiteness to become a supreme being. Whether that be instituting a racist hierarchy in the streets of Chicago or conquering death, the core of the desire is the same. Josephine confirms this when she asserts, "I don't owe this country a damn thing except the same hate it's always given me" (LaValle Chapter 6). As a child, Josephine experienced that hatred in schools where her intelligence was constantly questioned. She says, "And do you know I was such a fool that I thought I'd eventually get to the top of the wall? I'd finally climb over all their defenses" (LaValle Chapter 6). This quote is accompanied by an image of a young Josephine climbing a long, endless ladder. Josephine ascended the ranks of academia and science only to find that the power that awaited other people on the other side of the wall was still unavailable to her. After Akai's death, Josephine's rage takes the place of her climb. The rage, she argues, is more effective than her intellect. After all, it brings Akai back to her.

In *Lovecraft Country*, Ruby resists a life of powerlessness by arming herself with a certain kind of respectability. She dresses in clothes fitting the sophisticated department store job she desires. She takes classes at the local community center to bolster her resume. She works to be a credit to her race. Her desire to be perceived as respectable and gain entry to the kind of upward mobility available to white women shapes how her anger manifests. But like Josephine, Ruby is excluded from circles of power. Where Josephine fights for access to the upper echelons of knowledge, Ruby contends with the racialized and gendered ways capitalism separates groups into a hierarchy of difference (Melamed 77). In the third episode, "Holy Ghosts," Ruby explains that she wants to work at Marshall Field and Company, where she has applied several times. She has also taken several typing and accounting classes to show she was qualified. When she explains at a house party that she has not been hired despite all this work, a man asks, "You think Marshall Field's hasn't hired you because you're colored?" Ruby responds: "Of course I know that. And I'm willing to work harder than anybody else, if that's what it's gonna take. You know, if more colored folk thought like me, the race would be a lot further along." She says this just before discovering a burning cross on her and her sisters' front lawn. Ruby stands watch as others at the party take a stand with shotguns to guard the house until they hear police arrive. Just before the police arrive, Ruby drives away with the

shotguns in her trunk. In this moment, white supremacist hatred is juxtaposed with the denial of upward mobility for Ruby. With the burning cross, white supremacist hatred is linked to the work of the divine, similar to what happens with *Destroyer's* Director. Resisting racial terror becomes a struggle against not only white humans but also the white-male God's encouragement of that terror.

Ruby's rage is not always confrontational; in line with her respectable presentation, she does not scream or get into physical fights. In episode four, "A History of Violence," she goes into Marshall Field's one day and learns the store has already hired Tamara. Tamara reveals she was hired only a couple days before and that she "applied on a whim" (as opposed to the care and preparation Ruby took). Ruby is devastated because she knows Marshall Field's will not hire more than one Black woman. More than that, she is angry. That evening, when she plays a solo gig with her guitar at a bar, she sings Ma Rainey's "Chain Gang Blues." The song is about captivity and sorrow on the chain gang, and it purposefully reflects Ruby's feelings of captivity within her race and gender as well as the limited station that comes with it in the 1950s. Ruby plays her guitar with short, sharp strokes, pouring her anger into her music. The audience does not clap for her when she's finished, clearly not feeling entertained by the performance. She responds with, "Well, f*ck you too" and then relocates to the bar to describe her woes to a white man who buys her a drink. She says, "She got there first. Would've been me. Should've been me." Ruby's anger mixes with sorrow, so much that the anger seems buried. It is most recognizable in her body language. (It is also recognizable in her relationships with other Black women, which I will explore in the next section.) Ruby's desire to work at Marshall Field's, her educational moves toward upward mobility, and her language about "the race" lacking work ethic suggests she considers herself a respectable woman.⁴ This is likely part of the reason her anger touches only other Black women. Ruby hopes her work ethic, respectable dreams, and deportment will protect her from the label of Sapphire. It does not, though, because of the consistent distorting lens of the archetype.

In their own ways, Ruby and Josephine's rage is a response to their invisibility. This invisibility is more a distortion than an inability to be seen (Browne 11; Collins 79). The women are seen as their opposites—Ruby as unqualified and inadequate for Marshall Field's and Josephine as unfocused and less capable than her white counterparts. Hortense Spillers begins her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" with examples of these distortions: Peaches,

⁴ Brittany Cooper quotes Candice Jenkins in *Private Lives, Proper Relations* to define respectability in this context: "Black, largely female, generally middle-class desire [and] longing to protect or save Black women, and Black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity" (quoted in Cooper 153).

Brown Sugar, Sapphire, Miss Ebony First, and so on (65). She says, "The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene—the opening lines of this essay provide examples—demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative" (69). These distortions link back to Black women's captivity post-slavery in that they come to "signify the captive person" (69). While slavery is long over in both *Lovecraft Country* and *Destroyer*, the connected systems of capitalism, knowledge-production (science), and white supremacy hold Ruby and Josephine captive. The label Sapphire, designed to silence them, coils around those systems and forms a kind of cage. However, despite the constricting power of the label, anger is still a powerful force that both women wield to break through that cage.

The Precarity of Kinship

Black women born in rage live with a precarious relationship to kinship. I imagine Lorde's "wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers" on an edge of heartache. When a Black woman looks over the edge, she sees just how close she is to losing either her own life or her loved ones. Anger can act as a protective force, shielding the heart from pain. Feeling angry can be easier than feeling a perpetual state of wanting or fear (Lorde 153). Spillers names the condition of the Black woman as, among other things, "both mother and mother-dispossessed" (80). I choose to interpret this as both actual motherhood and metaphorical motherhood, so Black girls can grow up feeling their own heartache as well as watching the adults in their lives reflect a potential future pain.

The intergenerational nature of Black women's rage can create a sense of haunting. Haunting within Black feminist thought bends time so that the past and the present lay over each other in defiance of Eurocentric conceptions of time as linear. Viviane Saleh-Hanna defines Black feminist hauntology as "a counter-analysis to broken conceptions of time and bodies that critiques dominant, White supremacist constructions of colonized/colonizing, enslaved/enslaving and imprisoned/imprisoning bodies, lives, deaths, and histories." It is an "anti-colonial analysis of time" that can encapsulate repetitive and structural violence (Saleh-Hanna). Black feminist hauntology suggests that time can move vertically in addition to horizontally, which means structural violence, as well as joy and generations of resistance, build up in the present instead of staying in a distant past. Julia Jordan-Zachery describes this haunting as feeling her own pain and "the pain of the women who make [her] Black feminine divine lineage" (64). Part of the precarity of kinship Black women feel involves feeling pain that is not just ours.

Dr. Josephine Baker is a haunted woman. She carries her own experiences with racism, particularly when her intellect was challenged because of her race and gender. She also carries generations of pain. Toward the end of the graphic novel, Frankenstein's monster has gone ahead of Josephine to the lab and killed the Director. When Josephine realizes the Director is dead, she expresses disappointment that she did not kill the Director herself. Akai chastises her, but that only sparks a rant. Josephine says to both Pliers and Akai, "This country has told me exactly what it is. Who it serves and protects. It isn't you [her ex-husband], or me, and it sure wasn't our child. . . . This whole damn country is one big Civil War monument. It's time to tear it down" (LaValle Chapter 6). Here, Josephine connects her rage to the repetitive structural violence that haunts her.

Haunting can lead to rage; it makes it so that the past cannot be ignored or forgotten. This inability to engage amnesia can create an unsettled feeling, or as Jordan-Zachery says, a "something-must-be-done feeling" (65). In this way, rage can be a catalyst for action, even healing. When Josephine embraces her rage, she is able to bring her son back to life and destroy the lab, a site of oppressive systems of knowledge. In this way, haunting can also lead to healing. Akai is a representation of Josephine's determination to heal her grieving spirit. While Josephine is haunted by the specter of Black death, she responds by finding new ways to create and protect Black life. The haunting by systems of oppression can prompt a rage driven to protect kin.

Both *Destroyer* and *Lovecraft Country* demonstrate the social functions of Black women's rage. For Josephine, it is to protect her family; for Ruby, it is to protect her community. Lorde suggests Black women's anger is a "collective expression" that is just as much political as it is anything else (Jordan-Zachery 67). Building on Lorde's work, I argue Black women's rage is a meeting point for kinship, haunting, and hatred (the kind of hatred mentioned in the previous section). In *Lovecraft Country*, Ruby turns her rage on other Black women, namely Tamara (the Black woman who works at Marshall Field's) and her sister Letitia. In "Strange Case," the episode after she has learned that Tamara has been employed at Marshall Field's, Ruby, who has spent the night with a white man named William, wakes up as a white woman. She then takes advantage of the magical transformation to work at Marshall Field's. When Ruby finds out Tamara did not graduate high school, did not have prior experience, and had not taken any typing or accounting classes, she turns on her. While it is clearly not Tamara's fault, Ruby still directs her anger at the other Black woman even though the culprit is the system that only leaves room for one of them.

Lorde identifies this phenomenon, in which Black women unleash their anger most often on other Black women, as a byproduct of Black women's anger. This is

partly because it is safer to be angry at other Black women than to rage at racist structures and people. It is also because of the confluence of kinship, haunting, and hatred. Lorde says, "The anger with which I meet another Black woman's slightest deviation from my immediate need or desire or concept of a proper response is a deep and hurtful anger, chosen only in the sense of a choice of desperation—reckless through despair" (154). The anger rises from the connection, a kind of kinship even if it is fictive, and the interdependence. The "cruelty" and "harshness" Lorde speaks of appears when Ruby, empowered by her newly white skin, snaps at Tamara and belittles her (159). "She wishes the other woman would become someone else, anyone other than another Black woman" (167). Communal love and care is the way to keep Black women's rage from being an infection passed back and forth. At the end of the episode "Strange Case," Ruby turns her anger away from Tamara and toward the white male manager at Marshall Field's who tried to force himself on Tamara the night before. Ruby violently and repeatedly punctures the man's bare skin with the heel of her shoe in defense of herself and Tamara. Ruby's act of rage is also one of protection and community emerging from an understanding of the racialized and gendered violence Black women face.

Metamorphosis

Bettina Judd evokes the Sapphire as an "unwanted avatar" (Judd 178). The Sapphire figure is the Black woman's reflection in a Fun House mirror; her true self is obscured. More than that, the Sapphire is dangerous to Black women. In the white imagination, every Black woman is a Sapphire (unless she is desexualized and therefore a Mammy), and the Sapphire must be met with cruelty, so Black women learn to police their own behaviors to avoid being defined as angry. "To become angry is to become Sapphire, to become Sapphire is to confirm the negative relationship to humanity for which Sapphire is constructed" (Judd 180-181). This is about more than a politics of respectability. The Sapphire is dangerous not because she is damaging to the image of the race. She is dangerous because her perceived anger can invite physical violence. "To express anger places one in danger by the apparatus readied for law and order" (Judd 181). The Angry Black Woman in reality is an inherent challenge to dominant systems.

Judd makes an argument that reads to me more like two requests. First, she asks the reader to "luxuriate" in Black women's anger (186). For this, both art and ritual are necessary. Art and ritual combine to create a kind of ceremony that both reveals and grounds Black women's rage. She suggests that through this kind of ceremony, Black women's rage can be a kind of meditative practice. Second, Judd asks that the reader read Black women with a "methodology of anger" that requires

a different conception of human (183).⁵ The “deep structures” of the Black woman, which Judd defines as the common experiences of humanity that cannot be conveyed or understood through words alone, are misread in Black women (184). This misreading is a direct result of Black women fundamentally not fitting into the dominant definition of human. In this, Judd is bringing both Spillers and Wynter together to offer, as a path forward, a praxis that uses a new grammar to redefine human in a way that allows for the Black woman to do the monstrous thing and define herself. As Spillers says, “‘Sapphire’ might require after all a radically different text for a female empowerment” (80).

Sylvia Wynter offers her philosophies of the human at several points, but what is most relevant to my musings on rage and the flesh is her idea of the sociogenic principle (31). This concept begins with Fanon’s definition of sociogeny, which Weheliye defines as “a symbolic register, consisting of discourse, language, culture, and so on” (Weheliye 25), and calls for a new conception of human in order to account for the process of racialization. Wynter builds on Fanon’s theorization that Blackness exists only in relation to whiteness by arguing that the western concept of Man allows white men to separate themselves from Black men, whom they have deemed subhuman. With regard to the sociogenic principle, Wynter focuses on the fact that the western Man is primarily, almost exclusively, a biological figure. “Wynter summons the explanatory apparatus of neurobiology to elucidate how racialization, despite its origins in sociogeny, is converted to the stuff of ontogenesis; this is what Wynter refers to as ‘sociogenic.’” (Weheliye 26). Instead, she argues, it is important to see man as a hybrid, as both ontology (“the genetic dimension of human action”) and sociogeny (“a symbolic register; consisting of discourse”) (Weheliye 25; Wynter 31).

Though Spillers is thinking more epistemologically and Wynter’s theories⁶ are more ontological, they connect in two important ways for this essay. First, both offer a way of theorizing the origins of the Black woman. Because of the process of racialization, the Black woman does not exist without the white capitalist/colonizer. She is formed because of her biological differences and, perhaps more importantly, because of her sociogeny, the cultural signifiers and narratives that are attached

⁵ Judd offers that a methodology of anger asks “what is at stake? Why wouldn’t this Black woman be silent, knowing the risks of displaying anger? Such a methodology would have in its arsenal a literacy for the craft of communication that texts of rage deploy: that ‘simultaneity of discourse’ that has the capacity to convey clearly and obscure adroitly” (183).

⁶ Wynter speaks of Blackness more generally and within the context of academic disciplines. One of Weheliye’s critiques of Wynter is that she does not prioritize gender as an important marker of hierarchal oppression. I do believe, though, that Wynter would say her arguments around the sociogenic principle still apply to Black women, even if she is not doing a distinctly gendered analysis, like Spillers does.

to her. Wynter's sociogeny is related to Spillers' flesh in terms of the narratives created by and/or about Black women. It is within that relationship (between Black woman and white man) that her flesh and the corresponding hieroglyphics are formed. Second, Spillers and Wynter both argue that a new conception of human is required for the Black woman to be free. For Wynter, the western conception of Man does not allow the Black woman to come into being. The dominant cultural narrative has placed the blame for this on the shoulders of the Black woman. Instead, Wynter argues that a definition of human that accounts for differences not only in biology but on the level of the cultural narratives that get written into and under our skins is required. Spillers similarly argues that a new definition of human is necessary: "We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name'), which her culture imposes in blindness. 'Sapphire' might require after all a radically different text for a female empowerment" (180, emphasis in original). Instead of "joining the ranks" of the Eurocentric human, Black women can do the monstrous thing of transforming into something else, something insurgent. This monstrosity is outside the bounds of human. Similar to what Stryker suggests in the epigraph, Josephine and Ruby fight against the conditions they were born into, conditions that threaten their physical and psychological survival daily. As Judd suggests, a new definition of human, one that makes room for Black women born in rage and allows those Black women to define themselves and name their rage, would be a step toward liberation, a step toward Black women being human on their own terms. The process of racialization involves sociogeny, the flesh, and biochemistry; a Black woman's rage is also in all of those spheres, which constitute her very core. To ignore this, to try to dampen or erase it, would likely mean pushing the Black woman into proximity to whiteness, to respectability and to Eurocentric humanness. Instead, I suggest this re-definition is the internal process of what speculative fiction illustrates as an external metamorphosis. This analysis of metamorphosis involves a method of stepping into this rage, luxuriating in it, to see what insight comes of it.

Ruby's metamorphosis runs parallel to her process of metabolizing her rage. This metabolization, to borrow from Lorde, is a healing process through which pain and suffering pass through one's body and spirit (152). When Ruby first wakes up as a white woman, she is scared and confused. She heads to the South Side of Chicago to look to Black people for help. To her surprise, she receives all the help she needs from white police officers. In the following days, Ruby comes to understand whiteness as a currency. She trades in it to get everything from free ice cream to the job of her dreams. Ruby tells William: "I don't know what is more difficult, being colored or being a woman. Most days I'm happy to be both, but the world keeps interrupting, and I am sick of being interrupted" ("Strange Case").

Despite Ruby's words that she is content as a Black woman, William's magic opens up a previously closed pathway to power. It taps into a discontent that likely sits under her anger. During Ruby's time as a white woman, she is a different kind of human—a shapeshifter. Even when her skin is white, she is still Black. The magic did not give her an insider's insight into white culture and norms, and she stumbles sometimes by seeming out of place in all-white settings. For instance, when a group of white women, including Ruby, dance in the break room, the other women comment that Ruby moves her hips like a Black person. Ruby's ability to shapeshift gives her a new perspective, allows her to metabolize the hatred of white supremacy, and heals her enough that she is able to accept her true form.

In thinking of the new human (Wynter's human) as a combination of sociogeny/flesh and biochemistry, Ruby's sociogeny and flesh keep her grounded in a lineage of Black women even when her biochemistry changes. Still, her biochemical metamorphosis creates tension that sparks a new narrative. I argue Ruby does not go back to being the same human once William's magic passes through her system. Her sociogeny, which I also think of as her foundational self-narrative, is radically altered. When William apologizes for the pain involved in the metamorphosis, Ruby responds, "That wasn't pain. That was something else. Like being unmade" ("Strange Case"). Spillers describes the hieroglyphics of the flesh as part of a process of ungendering that began on the Middle Passage and continues with each generation of Black women. This is an unmaking process. Ruby's metamorphosis is a different kind of unmaking from the dehumanizing process Spillers describes. It is healing.

Josephine's anger is fuel for her metamorphosis and a method of futuristic knowledge production. For this, I have to point back to Audre Lorde. One important point Lorde raises is that Black women's rage is crucial to their survival. "What other creature in the world besides the Black woman has had to build the knowledge of so much hatred into her survival and keep going?" (Lorde 150). Understanding the hatred and the rage response keeps Black women from making decisions that could endanger their bodies and their progeny. For instance, Josephine points to a long history, preceding the Civil War, which led up to the hatred that took her son from her. Her reaction is rage—not just as a response to the single event of her son's death, though that would be reason enough, but as a natural retort to the accumulation of hatred over centuries. It is Baker's knowledge of this hatred, an understanding that permeates to her core and allows her to generate the scientific advancement that brings her son back. Lorde says, "Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create futures. It can only demolish the past" (152). Thinking through Black women's rage as inherently

relational (through haunting and kinship) does allow for it to be a productive force of futurity. Josephine's flesh-level rage exists always in relationship to Akai and the Director (and all she stands for). As Josephine does sense-making through the lens of her rage, she is able to create a new life with Akai, one in which he will never have to truly know the sense of loss she felt as she will be with him always. The way Black women use their rage in order to survive and be mothers or othermothers suggests that the rage does, in fact, create futures.

With the future in mind, Josephine, as a Black mother who knows unending grief, redefines the shape and capacity of the human with her kin. Baker created the technology necessary to transform her lover, the father of her baby, into a weaponized cyborg. However, the most evident example of this redefinition is Baker bringing Akai back to life. As Akai and Josephine flee from their home as both Frankenstein's monster and The Director are after them, they have a conversation about what Akai is:

Josephine: "The tech, those nanobots, they're essentially rebuilding you on a constant basis. If decay is like a flood, they are the sandbags."

Akai: "So eventually I could rot away? If the process moves faster than the machines?"

Josephine: "Actually, I think it's more likely the bots will begin to **replace** your flesh. They'll rebuild you literally."

Akai: "Eventually I won't be human at all, then? I'll be entirely made out of the nonmaterial?"

Josephine: "Yes, possibly. I have to tell you, Akai, I know a lot but I don't know everything."

Akai: "I'm your son."

Josephine: "Of course you are. But you're also something entirely . . . new."

(LaValle Chapter 5, emphasis in original)

As Josephine transforms her son into a different species, into something both human and artificial, she uploads her consciousness to him and hopes to open the door to a new ethics. She metamorphoses into a form that will always be with her son. Josephine tells Akai that as a species that is dominant in many ways, he has an opportunity to reshape how humans and other life forms interact with each other. She asks him to consider how he will treat people. The products of Josephine's rage generate the potential for a new system of ethics. In daring to step outside of the western concept of Man for both herself and her son, she opens up a world of exciting (and potentially dangerous) possibilities.

Black women who are born in rage can step into this rage—sit in it, study it, know its contours—and place it firmly in relationship to loved ones in an attempt to simultaneously see what knowledge emerges and also generate a unique set of behaviors that ensures the survival of our kin. This is a project of Black feminism that has been explored at length creatively.⁷ Weheliye suggests that Black studies and Black feminism exist in a space of “liminality, which contains potential exit strategies from the world of Man” (27). LaValle’s Josephine takes one of these exits and finds a new kind of future, where she can soothe her heartache. Ruby takes another exit to find more contentedness in her natural skin. Their transformations are only possible after embracing the Sapphire and harnessing their rage in a generative way. The liminality of Black feminism allows for future explorations of rage, flesh, and humanity that build on the work of Wynter, Spillers, and Lorde.

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⁷ Creative works related to Black women and kinship that inform this essay include Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, Tayari Jones’ *Leaving Atlanta*, and Toni Morrison’s “Sweetness.” Each of these works theorize different ways Black women process (or “metabolize,” as Audre Lorde might say) the hatred of white supremacy and how that process affects their loved ones.

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