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Stolen Life, Stolen Time:  
Black Temporality, Speculation,  
and Racial Capitalism

**B**lack life has always existed on the other side of time. In the film *Space Is the Place*, Afro-futurist maestro Sun Ra (Coney 1972) recommends, “The first thing to do would be to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time.” Blackness inaugurates possibility because it is, in part, defined by being exiled from history. Sun Ra describes abolishing time as a liberatory act for Black people. “With the official end of time comes the end of a history that includes African slavery and all the miseries of the dead,” he says. Put another way, blackness, understood as a certain set of politics, necessarily critiques time itself, because Black being poses a challenge to the fixity of history. Racial slavery attempted to steal African life by fixing time and thus history. Western or colonial modernity’s notion of history then forms an enclosure or limited world. In this essay, I explore how fixed notions of history foreclose potential fictional worlds, whereas speculative modes of storytelling informed by Afro-futurism inaugurate and birth possibility, new worlds. With an interest in how blackness was inaugurated and what it inaugurates, or what blackness is the conditions of possibility for, I examine a series of contemporary texts: Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full*

*Sea*, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the HBO series *Watchmen*, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, and Khalik Allah's *Black Mother*. Reading moments from these contemporary apocalyptic stories against each other, I track how entangled temporality is Black temporality whether Black characters are present or central or not to the plot. Black temporality is deeply antagonistic to the way European colonialisms attempt to organize and enclose the world.

Building on Sun Ra's words, Black temporality is a refusal to labor within the limits of history. It exists on the other side, not simply outside or excluded from time, but on the B-side of time and thus history. In spite of more than four centuries of racial exclusion and theft of the body, Black time does not demand inclusion within European colonial timelines. Instead, Black time continues to be stolen away by Black people, accumulating on the other side of history and the edges of the plantation as a resource for Black futures. Maroons across the hemisphere understood this intimately. The prehistory of Afro-futurism is evidence of the power of the speculative and how playing with time has been definitive of Black storytelling across the diaspora. I posit the way Black people have deployed the speculative then as a praxis of *stealing away* colonial time in order to unravel it. Black speculation claims time back from capitalist regimes of colonial extractivism that attempted to steal life itself through the mechanisms of racial slavery.

W. E. B. Du Bois's (1900) color line is then a temporal line as much as a prophecy because he speculated on what the future would hold, knowing the fate of Black people would determine the fate of the world. Not so much an oracle as he was acutely attuned to the definition of race and mechanics of racialization, the color line remains the vexing question of the twenty-first century. The avoidance of race in most sci-fi and speculative fiction, genres that often stage the future, is not a neutral act. Ignoring the future color line reinforces white supremacy because avoiding race does not solve racism. The limited capacity to imagine people of color in the future always has ethical underpinnings regarding genocide and who will exist in the future. The novels, films, and TV shows I examine here provide different answers to the question of who will exist in the future and the potential plot of the undoing of colonialism. The desire for race to not exist in the future is always coupled with a genocidal logic of multiracialist dilution of blackness and other people of color.

Ethnic studies offers numerous critiques of such raceless storytelling. Techno-orientalism has emerged as an Asian Americanist critique (2015) of white sci-fi narratives often located in ultramodern cities that look like Tokyo or Hong Kong, while Asians, if present, are depicted as "technologically advanced and intellectually primitive" (Rutgers University Press, n.d.), often

as robots (see Roh, Huang, and Niu 2015). Non-Western Indigenous practices of dreaming and nonlinear storytelling form a type of “scientific literacy,” Anishinaabe cultural critic Grace L. Dillon (2007) tells us in her definition of Indigenous futurisms. Indeed, modern capitalism inaugurated multiple apocalypses, foreclosing worlds for Indigenous peoples and Black people across the Americas. Because it depends not only on engineering fixed inequality but also uncertainty, I define capitalism as speculation in its purest and most raw form. The stock market depends on a series of bets and gambles. Speculative finance, which is to say all finance, depends on the accumulation of stolen time from laborers converted into surplus value. Profit is possible and unevenly distributed because of the uncertainty of how stocks will perform. Speculative storytelling, now, poses a challenge to the fixity or inevitability of capitalism as it allows us to create worlds beyond coloniality (Kamugisha 2019). The speculative mode has been critical to the Black radical tradition because it carries the potential to undo speculation in its purest form, capitalism.

Speculative fiction forms a critique of the present (see Lim 2009). Racial capitalism requires history, race, and time—three constructed variables—to be fixed as an ongoing dynamic. In moments of crisis, all three of these categories become called into question and are rescripted and redefined. I explore various narrative strategies for staging race and racialization in moments of global crisis. Each narrative confronts the terrain of the same country that we all live in that Bong Joon-ho aptly called *capitalism*. Countless reviews have done the work of analyzing thematic or biographical angles of these contemporary speculative novels, television series, and films; however, in reading them against one another here, I attend to what is encoded in contemporary literary and popular culture. I am led by philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s (2010) comments on the value of storytelling: “Culture is for me, primarily, the societal machinery with which a particular society or group symbolically codes its sense of self.” The extent to which the architecture of these filmic, TV, and literary worlds encodes a timeline of racial capitalism or not determines the ethical stakes about the future of race and racial formation.

As a form of escape, the prophetic worlding of the conquest, what cultural critic Tiffany Lethabo King identifies as Black and entangled Native apocalypse, in particular translates present anxieties into future dystopias. Between the narrative strands of these texts, I limn the capacity of contemporary storytellers to reckon with the contours of how political theorist Cedric Robinson defined *racial capitalism*.<sup>1</sup> In the realm of speculative fiction, race is written and rewritten in moments of global crisis where premature

death looms unevenly. Race itself is speculative, as a concept it is simultaneously reinforced and undone in these historical moments of crisis. The speculative has the potential to reorder the conditions of existence beyond coloniality. Organized in three parts, this essay begins by defining Black time as a stolen resource, in contrast to standard or colonial time. Next, I examine how storytellers deploy *the future* as either an alibi or as a resource in the cultural texts mentioned. Put differently, to some *the future* is merely an excuse to not have to be historically accurate, to others it is a narrative device full of possibility. Ultimately, I propose Maroon time as blackness working on the other side of time, as a cultivated resource stolen away across the Black diaspora often in coalition with peoples native to the Americas from the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia to the Quilombos of Brazil (see also Hanchard 1999). Reading across contemporary and racialized modes of storytelling, a certain set of ethics regarding the racial politics of who has the right to occupy the future becomes apparent.

### The Syncopation of Keeping Black Time

Black time is not-yet-standardized time. Drawing from Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant's (1999) poetic definition of Creole as "not-yet-standardized language," the power of the "not-yet" is a resource located in both Black language and time. Polyrythmic and often syncopated, Black time orders Black music (jazz, dub, reggae). It is anchored in, and mutated from, the multiplicity of precapitalist African temporalities (Russell 2009). My aim in defining Black time is not to essentialize time or racialize it, but to understand it as a philosophical critique of standardization as an imperial impulse. After all, race too is an imperial process of standardization. The very undoing of race is critical to the philosophy of Black temporality, central to a certain set of politics enacted by Black people across the ages. Cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman (2002) refers to the "time of slavery" as disjuncting all forms of relation, including time. On the plantation, time became a violent metric of colonial management stolen from Black people. As much as time was stolen from enslaved Africans, Black people *stole away* and stole away time as a resource.

Black time, then, stands in contrast to imperial time, quite literally "standard time," the standardization of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). The very opposite of the "not-yet" of Black time, GMT arbitrarily centers the world clock and time, thus the universe, as beginning in London. GMT orders time in order to secure and underwrite the power of coloniality. A convenient fiction of standardization, GMT or Coordinated Universal Time

(CUT) is fairly recent, beginning in 1884 when the Greenwich meridian became universally recognized as 0° at the International Meridian Conference. This moment of standardization unsurprisingly coincides with the period of abolition in Brazil, not seeing full emancipation until 1888. The Berlin Conference (1884–85) is another example of European colonial statecraft as a violent attempt to organize space and avoid interimperial conflict. The British attempt to standardize and segregate time into zones was a tactic of imperial statecraft and management that is rarely questioned.

The Middle Passage is a time zone not only of racialization and gender differentiation but also of other transfigurations of the flesh (Spillers 1987). This oceanic zone simultaneously inaugurates and also throws into crisis a multitude of categories. The “not-yet-standardized” threatens to undo imperial power of time and space (geography) through variance (other worlds). Cartesian lines of longitude and latitude dissect the globe into infinitesimally small quadrants, that is, coordinates. The time zone of the Black diaspora, for many thinkers, begins in the undifferentiated space of the Middle Passage (Gilroy 1992; Spillers 1987). The space is almost unrepresentable, but some draw imaginatively on the unspeakable horror and multiplicity of the Middle Passage racialized as a zone of the suspension of time and space. Black time accumulates over the generations in the intervals of time in which Black being emerges: abolition, independence, rebellion, refusal.

Cultural critic Stuart Hall (Hall 2017) describes Black time as a resource when discussing the anticolonial Black labor uprisings that swept across the Caribbean in 1938. He writes, “What had seemed like the premonition of imminent social collapse turned out, as I subsequently came to see things, as inaugurating a world of new possibilities, a world in which blackness itself came to function as a resource for the future” (47). Whose future? Black, here, functions not merely as epidermal or as a socioeconomic designation of class in Jamaica’s pigmentocracy, but rather as a certain set of radical politics of refusal to labor, to have one’s time stolen. Black temporality (time) is blackness itself as a resource for (Black) futurity. The very conditions of extended genocide of the transatlantic slave trade mean that a future inhabited by Black people has never been certain. The conspicuous absence of people of color from speculative fiction is an ethical determination on who is imagined to exist in the future, “epistemic genocide.”

Speculative genres allow for psychic doomsday prepping. Some storytellers unwittingly recast past atrocities in the timeless far future not as a critique but as a limit of imagination. Man as a fabulist species, theorized by Wynter and others as *homo narrans*, lives because of the desire to create a

story.<sup>2</sup> What if there is no plot? Black thinkers have known these narratives of climate and financial crisis are entangled and inseparable because blackness continues to disrupt colonial history's periodicity. Speculative fiction then is a political battleground for the future existence of people of color. Speculation is also always an act of valuation. Speculative writing is not the antonym of "well-documented" history. It is not easier because it is "made up." Often much, if not more, archival research informs the writing of demolishing the world, in order to build new futures. Toni Morrison, for instance, understands the detail of horror required to build a world anchored by the time zone of the Middle Passage in *Beloved*. A radical tradition, Black feminism centers generation itself (*poesis*) as universe building. In opposition to competition and militarism, Black feminisms conceive beyond the margins. Speculative worlds need not reproduce the asymmetry of violent systems of valuation of the present, and yet they often do.

### The Future as Alibi: *On Such a Full Sea* and *Exit West*

Beginning with the ways the future becomes deployed as an alibi or excuse, two novels, *Exit West* (2017) and *On Such a Full Sea* (2013), are bound by the colonality of time. Both are written by authors, Mohsin Hamid and Chang-rae Lee, respectively, who have been socialized by the West as a political project as much as they are rooted in the location of Asia (Pakistan and South Korea).<sup>3</sup> Attempting to restructure the limits of the "immigrant novel," often the only genre Asian and Asian American authors are allowed to exist in by commercial publishers of contemporary fiction, Lee and Hamid build worlds animated by the urgency of the "migrant crisis." *Exit West* and *On Such a Full Sea* presciently forecast global crisis, centering characters of color. Both optimistically cast romance between Afro-diasporic and Asian-diasporic characters in the future toward a happy ending of racial reconciliation. In the ruins of global crisis, the authors reinvent the immigrant novel using the speculative in many ways informed by Afro-futurism. Missing though from the future worlds of *Exit West* and *On Such a Full Sea* is a reckoning with the timeline of racial capitalism. Asian identity chafes against defining who is considered native and who is an immigrant. In doing so, the failure to confront the long history of US militarism as ongoing warfare in the narratives becomes a missed opportunity of critique.

Lee amalgamates African American and Asian worlds some two hundred years into the future, where Chinese people have relocated to Baltimore. *On Such a Full Sea*'s hypercapitalist Shenzhen as warzone translocated to

Lee's invented B-Mor, riffing on the African American Vernacular English nickname B-More for the city. A mid-Atlantic dystopic port city, it is haunted by HBO's *The Wire* (2006), having already colonized the world's imagination as a postapocalyptic Black foreclosure, a city ruined by Black-on-Black crime and drug trafficking. What makes it so easy to substitute the hyperdrive of industrialization of the Shenzhen borderlands with the deindustrialized peril of Black Baltimore? Lee describes his fieldwork, traveling voyeuristically to the Hong Kong–China border as an American intending to pen a critique of labor exploitation. He said, “Well, I had gone over to China to Shenzhen, to the villages there, where there are lots of factories, and visited a factory, and had this—you know, big idea to write this broad social novel about workers, owners, you know, all their struggles.”<sup>4</sup> While in other novels Lee has portrayed the detailed texture of the Korean American experience, the afterlife of World War II, and ongoing carnage of Japanese imperialism, his attention to China and Baltimore is not as keen in *On Such a Full Sea*. Not wanting to get stuck narratively by the burden of a realist proletariat tale of Chinese labor rights, Lee (Leyshon 2014) continues,

I felt as if I didn't have a special angle on the material, that it was going to be good journalism. But I think, for novels, you need the extra perspective or other layers of approach that make the story, you know, come alive in a different way. And so I dropped that novel. And, at the same time, you know, looking for something else, I came upon a premise about setting a novel in the future. And I had to set the novel in the future, because the premise involved bringing over en masse Chinese laborers to the United States, which I knew couldn't happen now, but perhaps could in a very different future.

I quote at length here to track Lee's narrative decisions for “a very different future” as a device that I identify as an *alibi*. The future as *alibi* allows Lee narrative possibility of what he thinks is a loophole but becomes a trap. The future as setting allows him to not be beholden to what Asian Americanist literary critic David Eng (2008) has aptly named the unfair requirement of ethnic American literature to *accurately* fill the gap of history. However, in not rigorously accounting for the teleology of racial capitalism, Lee off-handedly references blackness and Indigenous presence in ways that reproduce erasure of Black and Indigenous people of color. He gives the name Seneca to the first Charter Village where the main character, Fan, a Chinese American girl, arrives. Considering the Haudenosaunee presence and dispossession of Seneca sovereignty in the Northeast US, this is a loaded choice to not unpack. Furthermore, it conjures Seneca Village, a

nineteenth-century free African American independent settlement in present-day Central Park, and beckons a missed opportunity to consider US practices of naming stolen land (Central Park Conservancy 2021).

In a future world ravaged by a mysterious C-disease, Lee champions “hybrid vigor” by creating characters who are immune to the disease because they are of mixed heritage. He signals their “hybridity” with names such as James Beltran Ho and Pei Pie Xu-Tidewater, representing a chimeric multi-racial Chinese American future. He does not say it in as many words, but the Black DNA of the so-called “originals” is potentially the antidote to the C-disease. In the moments where Lee provides the backstory of postapocalyptic B-Mor, he oversimplifies US history. He indigenizes and romanticizes African Americans and Latin American, Central American, and Latinx people, erasing US Native people:

We should concede that unlike the experience of most immigrants, there was very little to encounter by way of an indigenous population. There were smatterings of them, to be sure, pockets of residents on the outskirts of what is now the heart of B-Mor, these descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves and twentieth-century laborers from Central America and even bands of twenty-first-century urban-nostalgics, all of whom settled the intimate grid of these blocks and thrived for a time and, for reasons that history can confidently trace and identify but never quite seem to solve, inexorably declined and finally disappeared. (Lee 2013)

The characterization romantically and tragically fetishizes Black Baltimore as only beginning in the nineteenth century, disregarding Native Americans. Lee often describes the racial marker of Reg’s “Afro-type hair” and “genetic filaments woven through genes.” In the future New China, people wear bronzer and “tease their hair” to look like “originals.” What Lee describes as “native blood,” or African descent, is desired. His attempt to critique anti-blackness reifies race. Lee obliquely references that history cannot solve the problem of the extinction of certain groups. Setting the stage for Chinese futurity becomes complicated by not problematizing the category of “immigrant.” Lee does not see the speculative potential to imagine the clandestine itineraries of Black and Lumbee, Piscataway, and Cherokee people in nineteenth-century Maryland.

Even as Lee does better than most contemporary white authors, guilty of avoiding race, this clumsy racialization and Afro-Asian romance at the end of the world between Reg and Fan serves a triumphant narrative of multiracialism. Genetic essentialism creates race in the future as a sorting tool that determines who is biologically predetermined to be worthy of living and



dying. Though Lee presents a compelling futuristic Chinese American heroine in Fan, and her love story with Reg, who is of African and Asian mixed heritage, is convincing, the novel falls short of a true critique of ruination of capitalism. In *On Such a Full Sea*, race becomes reproduced as a biological fact because Lee's universe aspires to a postracial future that inherently fetishizes diluted blackness as a horizon of aspiration.

Among mixed reviews, famed US sci-fi writer Ursula Le Guin (2014) chided Chang-rae Lee for dabbling in this futuristic genre of the postapocalypse, though not for the reasons I outline here. An NPR review by literature professor Maureen Corrigan (2014), who like Le Guin is white, declared that Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* "is a much more genial companion to have along on a trek through dystopia than the monochromatic Fan turns out to be." Corrigan's use of "monochromatic" is an example of techno-orientalism, seeing Asian characters that are not robots as robotic. It is this orientalism that Lee is pushing against by making a space in contemporary literature for fully fleshed-out Asian futuristic characters. Readers struggled with the experimental form of Lee's narration of the novel, a collective consciousness of "we" that almost feels like an all-knowing chorus of the future narrating. In conversation with author Susan Choi, who is Asian American, Lee was asked to say more about the question of vantage in the novel. Choi (Korea Society 2014) identified the narrative technique of the book as potentially being Asian or Confucian in the way it denies a singular individualistic American "I." Lee had not considered this but agreed when it was posed to him by Choi as an experimental choice.

Published a few years later, Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) features similar narrative choices as a futuristic love story. Coinciding with the crisis of the Brexit referendum, it was accordingly dubbed by press and publishers as a post-Brexit novel. The title signals a futuristic exit toward the West through magic portals that do not require the danger of the passage or the red tape and bureaucracy of asylum testimonials. As Glissant (1999) reminds us, "The West is not in the West. It is a political project, not a place." To exit the West as political project requires a critique of history. Understanding the necessity of Black capital and racial slavery to the political project of the West requires acknowledging modernity was always already failed. Many now, I believe, would opt to exit the West for the so-called Global South, and Brexit presents an interminable crisis, the result of unresolved colonial afterlives. The main characters of *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed, who are South Asian, inhabit Dark London and Light London with Nigerian characters as squatters in abandoned houses in Kensington.

Hamid (2014) is asked often about his choice to live in his native Lahore with family and has written on the topic. Though as a part of Pakistan's socio-economically elite class he was educated in Ivy League institutions, Hamid's choice to live in South Asia is deliberate and political. Hamid's literary choices also are often a negotiation between two worlds. In an interview, Hamid (2017) explains, "[*Exit West*] begins in a city which is a lot like Lahore, where I live. And the city is beginning to be rocked by these militants and terrorists. But partly, I just couldn't bring myself to write the collapse of a city like Lahore, where I live. I just didn't have the heart to write it." Hamid illustrates the power of naming, and the texture of crisis and racialization. Beyond Lahore and Pakistan, he specifically names other places and ethnicities: Mykonos, Mexicans, London, Nigerians. The novel concludes in Marin in what could have been a critique of Manifest Destiny and the violence of westward expansion, but he falls short. Hamid presents future California as a promised land representing futurity for Black and Asian characters without adequately historicizing the deep past of dispossession of Native sovereignty.

As a device, Hamid's magic doors become an *alibi* just like Lee uses *the future*. Hamid explains he wanted to experiment with skipping the narrative work of the trauma of the refugee journey the West requires for asylum, for instance. He refuses to perform the harrowing immigrant novel. The magic doors shrouded in darkness allow his hero and heroine, lovers Nadia and Saeed, to hop westward across continents, desperately seeking refuge, eventually building a new community with African American characters in Marin. The Bay Area, where real estate has continued to inflate exponentially since the dot-com bubble, is a racialized backdrop that Hamid does not problematize. With a Black population of two percent, Marin County has been portrayed as the end of the world in the pointed filmic critique *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (2019). Black displacement, ecological disaster, and nuclear contamination are underscored by the echo of Native dispossession. Marin County was created in 1850, but Hamid does not tell the story of its recent Mexican past, the geography of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), or further back beyond the colonial Spanish timeline. The toponymy speaks even if Hamid does not in the missed opportunity to explain that Marin is not named for being seaside or marine, but for the chief of Licatiut (Coast Miwok) tribe Huicmuse who became baptized and renamed as Marino (see Goerke 2007).

As for Lee, indigeneity is an afterthought for Hamid. The project of the United States is romanticized in ways that repeat the conquest. Hamid (2017) writes,

In Marin there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts—or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviors indistinguishable from anyone else. . . . And yet it was not quite true to say that there were almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter, and many others considered themselves native to this country, by which they meant that they or their parents or their grandparents . . . had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic, and their existence here did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetimes.

A third layer of nativeness was composed of those who others thought directly descended, even in the tiniest fraction of their genes, from the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent as slaves.

Biology and genetics come into play here as they do in *On Such a Full Sea*. Few narrate the conquest as the ongoing catastrophe that is what US cultural critic Alyosha Goldstein (2014) identifies as the “colonial present.” Romantic histories repeat “discovery” like Columbus, uncritically rehearsing Manifest Destiny. To say the United States is a nation of immigrants erases a world built through the entangled dispossession of Native sovereignty and African enslavement. Black American characters are romanticized as “originals,” erasing Native American presence by omission, much as in *On Such a Full Sea*. Again, human extinction is gestured to. Shorthand history makes the future into an alibi, an excuse to not be held accountable for ethical narrative choices. Periodizing the ongoing refugee crisis through an understanding of racial capitalism would illuminate how the United States became inaugurated as a gatekeeping nation. US imperialism invades, foreclosing and occluding.

### The Future as Resource: *Watchmen* and *Parasite*

The speculative worlds of *Watchmen*, the HBO limited series, and *Parasite* are not anticolonial by design but are attuned to the ongoing psychic trauma of US colonialism that uses the future as a resource. Without centering the United States, both stories form pertinent critiques of it. Black temporality, as I have defined it here, poses a disruption to time itself, and while *Watchmen* and *Parasite* are not produced by Black artists, they are informed by Black temporality in their engagement with the conditions of the creation of the United States that necessarily include racial slavery. Blackness emerges in phantasmic and material forms that disrupt the plot of racial capitalism, the speculative,

for a critique of the colonial present. Creator and writer of *Watchmen* Damon Lindelof (HBO 2019), who is a white man, admits and emphasizes that the production was truly a collaboration with Black writers and other writers of color in his writer's room, in which he was pushed to confront his whiteness and the white masculinity of comic books.

The South Korean production of *Parasite* may not seem racialized because everyone is Korean, and yet Bong Joon-ho touches on many layers of South Korea's colonial racialization by the United States and Japan that haunt. We hear echoes of Japanese colonialism in *Parasite* in the reference to tables for a garden party to be arranged in the crane formation of Admiral Yi defeating the Japanese navy during the Imjin Wars of 1592. The Academy Award-winning film has been celebrated for being at once a critique of Korean class warfare and also deeply universal. Whether by intention or not, both Lindelof and Bong build worlds attentive to the contours of racial capitalism to differing degrees. Engaging the timeline of US militarism and the Cold War—the Korean War and the Vietnam War—charts a protracted and urgent critique of US colonial time. US military bases in East and Southeast Asia form the haunted architecture and infrastructure of colonialism. The border of North and South is a scar similar to the scar that divided the North and South in the US Civil War, and that divided Vietnam. *Parasite* and *Watchmen* are steeped in a US colonial time, military time. According to the counterhistorical premise of the *Watchmen* comic, the Watergate scandal was never exposed, and Richard Nixon wins the Vietnam War by calling on superhero Dr. Manhattan. Vietnam becomes annexed as the 51st state of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Though not intended by *Watchmen* comic book creator Alan Moore, a white British man from the north of England, the name Dr. Manhattan carries the phantasmatic presence of race in the way Marin does in *Exit West*. The blue-skinned superhero, Dr. Manhattan, is the masculine immortal embodiment of nuclear modernity. He is the entangled temporality of US settler-colonial histories. Each time the name Dr. Manhattan is uttered as a signal to nuclear possibilities of mutually assured destruction and US might, it also necessarily conjures Lenape people. The citation of Native presence in place-names is also already an erasure for Indigenous futures, without invoking the referent histories or possible survivance (Vizenor 2008). The Manhattan Project was a genocide project in multiple ways. The Manhattan Project too does this work as a secret weapon of military technology developed at Columbia University, an institution built on stolen land that also poisoned the land, ecocide. The toxicity of the true Manhattan Project is an ongoing one of theft. The blue nuclear glow of Dr. Manhattan as counterhistorical figure is

doubly haunted symbolically by the shadow of the human racialized nuclear toll of Japanese life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, though it is not named. Asian life and Native life are disposable life to the US military complex.

Angela Abar represents quintessential blackness and Black womanness in the way that Toni Morrison defines it as creating choice amid choicelessness. Angela is a new world woman *and* is new world Black in her sense of intersectionality (Morrison 1988). Beyond the epidermal schema of what it means to be Black, as a girl orphaned by the shrapnel of the Vietnam War, Angela makes choice out of choicelessness. Angela literally experiences the pain of her time-traveling grandfather—a man who survives the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre as a young boy—threefold. She inherits his pain almost epigenetically as “blood memory,” a concept that resonates in both Black and Native epistemologies. Angela literally ingests her grandfather’s pain by overdosing on his memories of white supremacist violence in the form of his Nostalgia pills. In this future world, dementia medicine comes in the form of capsules that trigger memory, but they are only prescribed to the person they belong to. Angela is pulled into the historical memory of an entangled temporality of blackness in Oklahoma, the place of her ancestral roots, and Vietnam, the place of her birth. The fictional Nostalgia pills are the resource of blackness. She affectively comes to understand the pain of directly experiencing what her grandfather did as the sole survivor of the Black Wall Street Massacre as a little boy. *Watchmen* has been critiqued for shedding light on “Black Wall Street” but also occluding the intimacy and overlap between Black Native life and the history of freedmen, critical to any true depiction of Oklahoma. The disruption forms its own set of elisions, but it importantly challenges the US colonial timeline. While the depiction of the colonial present is not perfect, and Viet Than Nguyen (2019) has also critiqued the show’s portrayal of Vietnam, there are important reckonings with US colonialism the TV series stages.

The HBO adaptation does not shy away from the narrative challenge of the comic book. The epidermally blue Black Dr. Manhattan in the series deploys blackness and time as a resource in his vessel, the corpse of a recently deceased Black soldier that Angela selects. It is important that his embodiment as Black is Angela’s choice. Extracting choice out of choicelessness, she chooses a Black husband, and they choose to adopt children who happen to be white. Choosing family is important also because she is orphaned at a young age in Vietnam. The promotional posters play with a visual effect of blue blackness with a filter of blue light on actress Regina King’s skin to foreshadow the godly glow of what Angela Abar has the potential to become in relation to Dr. Manhattan, a superhero. The yellow clock icon, the classic

*Watchmen* symbol, forms a golden halo of time framing the Black heroine. The blue glow suggests something transformative other than the often-imagined green glow of toxic sludge. Another nod to entangled temporality, the motif of eggs stands in for the proverbial temporal quandary of “the chicken or the egg,” signifying Black time as a resource. A choice is given to Angela by Dr. Manhattan in the form of an egg she can ingest to gain his powers and in the form of her grandfather’s Nostalgia pills, which she ingests so they do not end up in the wrong hands. To ingest or not the racial injury of our ancestors is often not a choice for Black people.

Entangled temporality is the premise that makes *Watchmen* the series such a poignant love story. It is inevitable to Dr. Manhattan that he and Angela will fall in love, because he experiences all time all of the time. As a plot device he embodies entangled temporality. Yet as Lindelof (HBO 2019) explains, Dr. Manhattan does not experience the emotionality of the multiple futures he sees. Angela’s love makes Dr. Manhattan vulnerable. The demiurge chooses mortality in order to save Angela’s life. Marked by the phantasmatic presence of race, indigeneity in his name and living in a Black man’s body (Yahya Abdul-Mahteen II), Dr. Manhattan disrupts the original raceless universe of *Watchmen* that like other DC comics valorizes white masculine power as superpowers. The biological fact of Dr. Manhattan’s blue and Black body is a powerful statement of Black love and thus futurity, though epidermally blue.

Dr. Manhattan’s final act of love is transferring his power to Angela, should she choose to accept it. The egg grants her consent, whether to receive the superpowers bestowed on her by her lover or not. Consent or choice here is significant because of the precondition of lack of sexual consent that prefigured Black women’s choice under racial slavery. It is important then that the TV series that will not have a second season ends with Angela barefoot taking a step to potentially walk on water. Will she, or won’t she? The viewer does not know in this speculative future for the DC Universe, and it almost does not matter. In some sense, from a Black feminist lens, for Angela to simply inherit the power of Dr. Manhattan like a first lady later becoming president is not the point. The significance is in the leap, the Fanonian leap of potentiality for inaugurating a new world of possibility beyond masked white-supremacist avengers. The power lies in the uncertainty of the speculative. Fanon (1967: 229) writes, “The real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.” For Angela, the water of the swimming pool suggests temporal fluidity and oceanic potentiality. It not only signifies the miraculous, of Jesus walking on water, but also Black Atlantic amniotic potentiality. Abar’s Black futurity is importantly not premised on having biological chil-

dren, though it is significant that she is a Black mother with a chosen family amid choicelessness.

Like *Watchmen*, *Parasite* received almost universal critical acclaim. The film's hyperpresent representation of hypercapitalism is a filmic critique of the cult of meritocracy and consumerism in contemporary South Korea. Undercurrents of US conquest of Indigenous people emerge symbolically at moments that explicitly permeate the diegesis. The young boy Da-Song's cosplay obsession with "playing Indian" subtly marks US imperialism in Korea. Da-Song does not play "Cowboys and Indians," only the Indian, which is concerning to his mother. This racial performance is echoed by the foundational US theatricality of "playing Indian" during the Boston Tea Party. As Ralph Ellison (1953) wrote of the defining racial performativity of redface, "When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical" (see also Deloria 1999). Toy suction-cup arrows shoot across the house. A teepee is erected in the backyard, and Bong consistently returns the viewer's attention to subtle haunting of US warfare and the dispossession of Native sovereignty as child's play.

While Bong does not touch on blackness in any explicit way, the social and labor arrangement he stages is choreographed by a logic familiar to that of the US colonial plantation. It is the architecture of occupation. The proximity between the Kims and the Parks is the spatial logic of the plantation, where smell becomes a dividing socioeconomic line that often threatens to betray the Kims. Because they all smell the same, the stench of their semi-basement subterranean dwelling almost gives them away. Desire and disavowal of bourgeois intimacy structures the Park household. The Kims are not merely their house servants but an echo of the subversive cakewalking of enslaved Africans who play house as soon as the Parks are away on a weekend camping trip. The subterranean tunnels of the ornate Park residence represent a hidden architecture—not simply of Cold War bunkers designed for fears of nuclear proliferation, but also, it is stated embarrassingly that the tunnels were designed to hide from debt collectors and from North Koreans. Labyrinthine bunkers are the architecture of both civil wars, the Korean War and the impending collapse of capitalism facilitated by an unpayable debt. The tunnels are an insurance plan, a house hidden with the house as refuge, in case the have-nots should one day return and want to collect on the debt of South Korea living in the sun. In this way we might imagine that every South Korean has their tethered resentful North Korean twin—tethered economies and worlds—diametrically opposed. The architecture is Black and of the US plantation. The hypercapitalist regime means that they need not cross the



border to locate their body doubles. A servant underclass of subterranean semi-basement dwellers is ready to take their place. Cold War carnage carves a divided architecture—communism or democracy (capitalism).

To see *Parasite* for the con movie that it is means to understand how South Korean cinema inherits the tropes of US confidence games, race, and theatricality. The originally American genre of “faking it till you make it” is what the Kims perform like a vaudevillian family of actors. The impossible proximity and cramped architecture of their impoverished subterranean living quarters is akin to the proletariat intimacy of Tin Pan Alley tenements. Korea is postbellum, and the art that surfaces after war, like Vaudeville, reflects this racial phantasmatic unreckoning. Wars within wars, the afterlife of the Korean War is haunted by the afterlife of the US Civil War. After these wars of secession and attrition, unresolved betrayals shape the inequal architecture, dividing the peninsula and the nation in two. The long history of US militarism as part of the project of US conquest entangles the temporality of Bong Joon-ho’s hyperpresent speculative critique of a multiplicity of Korean colonial occupations.

Bong (2020) says, “I tried to express a sentiment specific to Korean culture, [but] all the responses from different audiences were pretty much the same. Essentially, we all live in the same country, called Capitalism.” *Parasite* is necessarily site specific to South Korea and demands an international audience. Yet Bong notes the universal appeal of the film is experienced by viewers the world over because of the conditions created by capitalism. Whether Bong is aware of the academic valence of “racial capitalism,” *Parasite* belies an understanding of its temporality in the way the colonial present of US militarism haunts contemporary Seoul.

South Korean economic success since the Korean War casts it as the exemplar republic for Cold War US exportation of democracy. Bong’s critique of US militarism is also mediated through US military standardized language made intimate. The film ends on a tragic epistolary note of Morse Code, a US military language, the code of dots and dashes, of letters repeatedly performed through blinking lights from a distance. *Parasite* ends in a speculative future where the son who learned Morse Code as a Boy Scout is possibly able to free his father who has been trapped in the subterranean tunnels of the wealthy house for decades. There is power in waiting and dreaming otherwise than the genocidal dreaming of the “American Dream.” Ki-woo works his way up toward the social ladder or capitalist success in order to buy the house to free his father Ki-taek, who has become a ghost in the basement, a fungible replacement for another poor man who inhabited



the substructure of the house decades before. The submerged human secrets of the colonial basement haunt the suburban South Korean house, much like the Great House of the plantation.

### Trimesters of Becoming: Black Waiting and Maroon Time

A better understanding of history does not guarantee a more just future. Speculative worlding reveals the ethics and codes of society. Every hundred years or so we see cycles of forgetting and cycles of liberation in Jamaica, in 1736 (the Maroon Wars), in 1838 (Sam Sharpe's Christmas rebellion leading to Emancipation in the British West Indies), and in 1938 (anticolonial labor uprisings across the Caribbean). What could 2038 hold? *Black Mother* (2018) by director Khalik Allah gestures toward a possible answer. Another nonlinear engagement with Black time as a resource for the future, the film centers becoming and the *not-yet* I have identified as the signature of Black time. The promise of the future, or futurity, is a resource not an alibi for Khalik Allah. A film without a plot, *Black Mother* is nondiegetic. If the plot represents enclosure—a linear beginning and end—*Black Mother* exists beyond narrative, free of any timeline. The filmmaker rewrites history through Black time and storytelling directly by Maroons and Rastas he interviewed in Jamaica. Maroon indigeneity and what Wynter calls “indigenization” are doubly significant because many Maroons are also of Indigenous Amerindian heritage in Jamaica. Coalitions exist and survive in the blood and reflect who the Spanish attempted to exterminate and subjugate in the sixteenth century before being supplanted by the English. Black time accumulates as a resource stolen away and handed down for the future that Hall described. *Black Mother* is out of time and out of place, working on what Sun Ra describes as “the other side of time.”

Sonically (disjointed audio) and visually (light leaks), the film ruptures expectations of visibility by intentionally disorienting the viewer. Enveloped in the darkness, the viewer is immersed in the underside of the Caribbean as vacation paradise. Khalik Allah's Kingston Noir of sex workers and other people considered “indigent” or houseless are central to the order of his diasporic return to his grandfather's native Jamaica. Like Angela Abar, Khalik Allah is in dialogue with a Black past of spirituality with his grandfather, a deacon. The film stages the personal yet universal inheritance of trauma with the climactic event of the emergence of the blackness, the birthing of a Black baby. Shocking as this may or may not be as a filmic trope, the miracle of life unsettles inasmuch as it centers emergency and emergence, cutting the cord of colonial modernity.

Khalik Allah stages the Black womb and the literal crowning as a theater to show how the edict of the Americas of racial slavery as hereditary slavery *partus sequitur ventrum*, that which is brought forth follows the womb. The curse of original sin across the hemisphere, blackness has long been narrowly defined as slave status inherited from the mother. Following the womb need not represent the enclosure of “natal alienation” in the filmic world of Khalik Allah. He celebrates the universality of birthing and the specificity of what comes forth from the Black Madonna, new worlds. The concealed means of production, the labor power of Black women’s reproductive work, are revealed (see Morgan 2018).

The imagery of water spilling down stairs is amniotic and poignant in both *Black Mother* and *Parasite*, which also features a flood. The water breaks, cascading down stairs. Khalik Allah reminds the viewer of the precarity of climate crisis and the increasing frequency and strength of hurricanes for an island nation like Jamaica. Water signals the natural disaster of cleansing too in *Parasite*. The imagery of flooding signifies the shared fate of climate crisis for us all, albeit uneven. The Kims are climate refugees after the flood, taking refuge in a high school gymnasium, forced to evacuate their semi-basement dwelling, recalling Black climate refugees seeking shelter in the Louisiana Superdome. The trajectory of racial capitalism is the pressure that broke the levees of New Orleans, and Hurricane Katrina, the catastrophe of failed infrastructure for the have-nots of US colonialism, which the Koreans are too.

There are perhaps as many forms of Black time as there are Black people. The time zone extends across the multiplicity of geographies and ecologies of Black life. One vital form of Black time is found across the Black diaspora, Maroon time. The Maroon clock is centuries old, anchored in a deep sense of history. Frantz Fanon (1968: 120) described such waiting as definitive of who he was: “If I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become sensitive.” Black waiting then is defined by an acute sensitivity to environment, and to observational praxis, that is determined by investigation. Maroon philosophy, grand and petit, can be traced across the hemisphere from Brazil to Suriname to Haiti to Jamaica to Virginia to Florida (see Roberts 2015). The speculative has always then been a mode of power, because the word’s etymology is rooted in “seeing” as “spying,” looking with a purpose—not necessarily for surveillance but for observation, for information before acting.<sup>6</sup> Seeing here also resonates with the prophetic and the ability to foresee what has yet to arrive. Thus, Black speculation is a horizon of radical possibility celebrating the power of uncertainty in uncertain times of crisis.

The speculative carries the potential to undo speculation itself, or capitalism. Race is one of capitalism's stories or fictions. Black feminist speculative modes, in particular, are essential to the plot of undoing. Hartman (2019) poetically defines "the plot of her undoing" as capitalism. She deploys the speculative power of critical fabulation to attempt to undo the violence of the plot. If, as historian Vincent Brown (2020) urges us to reconsider, the Haitian Revolution and other Black rebellions are inflection points in an ongoing state of warfare between West Africa and Western Europe, then the emergence of blackness itself is a resource for Black futures. Brown's elegant reperiodization reframes *marronage*, and the Maroon Wars in Jamaica in particular, as an ongoing series of acts of global proportion and strategy. Just as the Haitian Revolution was a thirteen-year interruption to the space-time of coloniality, Black freedom threatens to abolish the very notion of time itself. Blackness is not fixed and thus it continues to redefine historiography by restructuring structure itself, as a trickster, redefining *form*. A politics and aesthetics of shapeshifting and mutability, defying genre, Black temporality cyclically emerges as a resource for Black people but also influences the fate and story of the world, as Du Bois prophesied. So though the stories examined here are not all Black stories, they are impacted by Black time and storytelling.

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer," wrote Zora Neale Hurston (1937), speaking in the register of Black time as critique. Black grammarians understand this intimately when they deploy Black time, stolen away over the generations. The conquest was not inevitable, nor is it over.<sup>7</sup> The power of the Black grammarian resides in the patience and precision of the storyteller, the power of observation and narration. The Black grammarian *watches, sees, reads, waits, and prophesies*. Keeping the Maroon clock, waiting is his or her decisive act, a military tactic. Maroon time, lying in wait, is as critical to the guerrilla nature of Maroon warcraft as it is to Maroon cooking, like jerk, that requires many days of low smoking.<sup>8</sup> Maroon settlements continue to show the world that another world beyond racial capitalism is possible. Waiting and camouflaged in nature, intimate inhabited knowledge of the earth and sea, is the Maroon strategy. The quiet patience, persistence, and fortitude of *marronage* is in the not-yet standardized potentiality of Black time. Ongoing, *marronage* is then not a metaphor but an urgent tactic of survival that depends on stealing back stolen time. Accumulating Black time as a resource toward imagining Black futures, the speculative nature of Black storytelling is a radical act. Always drawing attention to the speculation that is the very uncertainty which capitalism is founded upon, blackness continues to work on the other side of time, the B-side of radical possibility.

## Notes

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- 1 For a genealogy of the usage of the term *racial capitalism* beginning in South Africa to Cedric Robinson's deployment of the phrase to its present revival, see the introduction to Jenkins and Leroy 2021.
- 2 Sylvia Wynter (2010) extends *homo narrans*, or the binomial nomenclature for man as storyteller, also theorized by Kurt Ranke and Walter Fisher in the 1960s, to theorize what defines Man as genus distinct from other hominids.
- 3 Lee grew up as the son of a doctor in Westchester, migrating from South Korea at age three with his family.
- 4 For Chang-rae Lee on the fun of writing the future for *On Such a Full Sea*, see PBS Newshour 2014.
- 5 Lindelof notes that he was inspired by the ongoing nature of the dispossession of Hawaiian sovereignty as a model of the colonial present.
- 6 OED Online, "speculative, n." Oxford University Press (accessed March 2021)
- 7 Sylvia Wynter's (2010) usage of the term "Black grammarians" alerts us to the ways in which time is located in language, both the grammar of speaking and the historicity of writing. Tiffany Lethabo King casts Wynter as a "Black grammarian," with a cohort of others, including Toni Morrison, Junot Díaz, Hortense Spillers, and graffiti artists who vandalize Columbus statues because of their refusal to accept the conquest is complete.
- 8 Tactics of warcraft and cooking are equally necessary modes of Black survival. See Goffe 2020.

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