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# The Souls of Black Women: Reimagining Futurities Beyond the Veil

Kevin A. Blanks

## Introduction— “The Souls of Black Women”

Confession: I’m not sure if you are aware, but we are living through another apocalypse. As time ushers us into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are experiencing what was unimaginable to those who came before us—challenges we never thought we would have to face. A global pandemic threatens to leave us breathless; bodies of color are subjected to an increase in state and police violence, and our poor, marginalized, and disabled communities are left unprotected and uncared for.

I’ve intentionally selected the term “apocalypse” to signify that we have experienced small and large apocalypses in our many lifetimes. While *apocalypse* sounds daunting and ominous, I argue that its materiality offers possibilities of reimagining something more, something better, and otherwise. I believe that apocalypses leave behind devastating properties in their wake, and yet it is the traces of these ruins that I turn to for their malleable power in illuminating pathways towards futurity.

Black futurity has always felt elusive. In *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (2021), Kevin Quashie conveys *futurity* alongside “black aliveness,” gesturing to the notion of imagining an otherwise where blackness is able to exist beyond death, where “the condition of being alive is of us” (Quashie 12). While we have always persisted through these apocalypses, I am very much aware that our survival would not be possible without the life force of Black women—for “the lived experience of one who is Black and female is comprehensive enough to manifest totality” (11). It is this totality, this universe of Black women that I carry with me in my work. It is the ancestors who remind me of the power in taking scraps from oppressive white men and turning them into metaphorical and physical sustenance. It is my mother, whose many sacrifices have assembled into the “why” behind this labor of love. It is the many magical Black women that I encounter and engage with in my day-to-day life and the future Black women as we leave this world in their hands. Thus, Black futurity is made possible through the souls of Black women.

This paper attempts to model a reading practice and Black world-making that feels meditative—with hopes of attuning our senses to the world(s) around us—in order to illuminate new ways of seeing and knowing and to explore the possibilities of being and becoming. I pair W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) alongside Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993). While Butler’s novel is written ninety years later, I wanted to problematize the concept of linearity as both narratives are taking place within their own apocalypses—Du Bois is concerned with world-making beyond post-emancipation, and Butler transports us to the year 2024, where some of the same issues have permeated through time

and have caused the world's destruction. Through a careful examination of the relationship between Du Bois' use of the "veil" and Butler's use of the *Earthseed* manifesto, I argue that the social regeneration of Black women is shaped by the environment—natural, temporal, and social. I work through selected scenes of each case study to trace the practice of Black women becoming whole and human, demonstrating the possibilities of an alternative world. I argue that *The Souls of Black Folk* and Lauren's *Earthseed* manifesto both serve to imagine what an elsewhere would look like, a world where Black beings are free.

### **"Dissemblance Behind the Veil"**

The post-Emancipation era marked an end of one world and the beginning of another. Black folks found themselves divided from their white counterparts along the color line, creating two worlds in which our ancestors had to learn how to navigate for survival. A Black environmental lens allows us to examine the characteristics of this anti-Black climate and the ways that it shaped and reinforced the category of Blackness and—specifically for this paper—Black womanhood. I posit Rob Nixon's theoretical intervention of "slow violence," as I find it particularly useful in drawing our attention to how Black folks were disproportionately silenced in this atmosphere. Nixon defines "slow violence" as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). We cannot afford to discount these crippling and invisible effects because they play a significant role in affecting temporalities, ecologies, and humans. Nixon's theoretical framework helps us attune our senses so that we may examine the relationship between the aftermath of a violent historical past and its correlation to Black world-building.

The invisible effects of slow violence created toxic environments and obstacles for progressive Black womanhood during the post-Emancipation era. Du Bois refers to this era as a striving for equality, yet the future was quite uncertain for Black women. The question becomes whether there was space in the professional world for women or if they were better suited for the domestic sphere, a space of "enlightened motherhood" that would pressure Black women to focus their efforts on rearing their sons. Black poet Francis E.W. Harper suggests that Black women have always created new pathways out of destruction, and they have always been the foundation for liberatory practices. The Black woman's disavowal of the heteropatriarchy demonstrates there is something better worth striving for.

I bring W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* to the forefront of our conversation to rethink through the lens of Black ecofeminist thought. In the chapter titled, "Of the Training of Black Men," Du Bois notes that "God created a tertium quid, and called it a Negro," relegating Black bodies to a hierarchical positioning somewhere between human and cattle (Du Bois 63). Blackness becomes confined within this carceral space of negation, severing us from the tenderest aspects of ourselves. It is this severance, this splitting, this tearing-apart that we can trace back through the historical materiality—particularly in excavating how the violent effects of chattel slavery continue to permeate through the porous boundaries of our present. In the afterlives of chattel slavery, the flesh has always marked the captive Black body. Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers terms this act of marking or *branding* as the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," signifying that the flesh tells the narrative of the Black body. Spillers furthers this idea by

noting that the flesh itself is a marker for racial violence. It is the color of the skin which determines if and what kind of violence is inflicted on someone.<sup>1</sup>

The fleshy materiality of our bodies determines a differentiation and hierarchy of races through sociopolitical processes. In other words, our flesh gives whiteness its meaning and its power within a white ableist, heteropatriarchal society. Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim* (2017) discusses the misuse of Black flesh as a form of "debilitation," emphasizing that the state racializes bodies expected to "endure pain, suffering, and injury" (Puar xiv). The state's desire to target and regulate the Black body through incarceration, policing, death, and other forms of biopolitical control reinforces this debilitation, resulting in a slow wearing down of Black bodies. While the social environment itself inscribes us with debilitating effects of slow violence, I argue that even as flesh, the Black body still labors, still performs freedom, still demands to be seen as more than just a problem. I suggest that an unraveling of the connective tissue between oppressive binaries—such as those that create an imbalance in power—will deconstruct the exclusion of marginalized bodies from the normative world.

Du Bois' concept of double consciousness forms as a response to this foreclosure, resulting in the construction of the two worlds. It is the way Black folks have encountered a separation between a white world and a Black world and must learn to survive by weaving in and out between the two. Du Bois expresses this idea in the chapter, "Spiritual Strivings," from *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (3).

In this scene, the white world is framed through the white sociological gaze, which distorts the apprehension of how one is perceived. Du Bois states that Black people are "born with a veil," suggesting that double consciousness is an inheritance passed down through generations—we can trace this back to the antebellum slavery era, another apocalypse, where our ancestors were compelled to hide their true selves from their masters and mistresses. It is also worth mentioning that many enslaved children were not aware of their precariousness up until the moment they witnessed acts of violence, leaving them transformed. For instance, Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiography that he entered the "blood-stained gate" into slavery when he witnessed the violent assault against his Aunt Hester/Esther. As an enslaved boy, Douglass always lived unconsciously behind the veil, but it was the blood-stained gate that blackened his body. It is at this moment that his soul became "darkened by a shadow of vast despair" (Du Bois 3). The veil operates as a depiction of the two worlds that we are born into,

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<sup>1</sup> Spillers, H. J. (1987). *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar book*. *Diacritics*, 17(2), 64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>

causing a severance between two selves, two souls. The moment we become aware of our own precariousness is when we are able to develop the gift of double consciousness in order to navigate within the veil.

Du Bois' use of masculine pronouns creates an absence for Black women, and I want to pause here to fill in the gaps with Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance." In her essay, *Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West* (1989), she offers this theoretical concept as a framework to examine how Black women concealed and protected the inner aspects of their lives from sexual violence and oppression. Similarly to Du Bois' double consciousness, the "cultural of dissemblance" operates as a form of resistance and power. Although Du Bois expresses that an anti-Black world doesn't grant Black folks a sense of true self-consciousness, I turn to Hine's "culture of dissemblance" to argue that in fact, Black women shielded their true selves inward behind a mask-like illusion. This project does not attempt to delineate between the two theoretical frameworks, but instead seeks to pair them together to explore what possibilities may arise from this conversation.

As long as the veil shuts us out from the American world, our two selves will always be at war with one another, waiting for reconciliation. Imagining a Black world, or what Du Bois refers to as "the promised land," would allow us the space to merge our two selves into their truest and most authentic form. It is not an apocalypse but more of a paradise where we can imagine ourselves as free and whole. This would transport us back to the site of the prehuman, to a time and place where the meaning of our Blackness persists beyond the limited space of the veil. Double consciousness and/or a "culture of dissemblance" heightens our senses, compels us to slow down and breathe, and grants us the gift of knowing that this heteronormative and white world is not sustainable for our Black bodies. This second sight trains Black women and men for life, "for they are not fools, they have tasted of the tree of life, and they will not cease to think."<sup>2</sup>

### **"Like a Natural Woman"**

I now turn to Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as she exemplifies similar ideas on the relationship between Black world-making and double consciousness:

There *is* life out there. There are living worlds just a few light years away, and the United States is busy drawing back from even our nearby dead worlds, the moon, and Mars. I understand why they are, but I wish they weren't. I suspect that a living world might be easier for us to adapt to and live on without a long, expensive umbilical cord to Earth. *Easier* but not easy. I think people who traveled to extrasolar worlds would be on their own—far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies—and far from help. Well out of the shadow of their parent world (83).

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<sup>2</sup> Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 912–920. Web.

In this scene, Lauren Olamina is a young, Black, and disabled woman who has escaped the devastation of her home life with hopes that a better world exists. The novel is set in an apocalyptic future in California where the slow violence of the toxic environment is made visible metaphorically. For example, the impoverished people in Lauren's community are ravished by state negligence, failures in infrastructures, and a lack of access to clean water, food, healthcare, and housing. They are described as "living skeletons," illustrating how the invisible effects of slow violence become materialized as skin, bones, a few teeth, festering wounds, and untreated diseases. Through imagery of a dying world, Butler suggests that an apocalypse like this one isn't too far from our own present moment. Lauren's double consciousness allows us to recognize that the veil is drawn and she must navigate in between the normative and non-normative worlds. I use "normative" and "non-normative" here to signify that the rules of Butler's world(s) are different from our own. However, we can distinguish that the world-building here suggests social constructs are in place that hinder people from a sense of belonging.

In the novel, Lauren appears to be nondisabled, yet their bodyminds, which is defined as the enmeshment between the mind and body, shape the ways in which they interact with others and the environment. In this world, Lauren learns to adapt and protect herself by keeping her disability hidden from those with ableist mindsets for fear of discrimination:

"I had to learn to pretend to be normal. My father kept trying to convince me that I was normal. He was wrong about that, but I'm glad he taught me the way I did."

"Maybe you are normal. I mean if the pain isn't real, then maybe—"

"Maybe this sharing thing is all in my head? Of course it is! And I can't get it out. Believe me, I'd love to" (194).

This scene occurs after Lauren discloses her disability to her friend Harry, who feels lied to and betrayed for not knowing about Lauren's hyperempathy. Sami Schalk's *bodyminds* (2018) helps to illuminate how often marginalized bodies must bear the burden of the social environment. It is not the responsibility of Lauren to change herself; it is the environment. Harry insinuates that Lauren's disability is happening in her head as if it is merely a delusion, just because he cannot physically see it. Not all disabilities are physical: "people of color and the poor are more likely to have experiences on the border outside of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness due to violence and failures of society" (Schalk 10). Butler's *Parable of the Sower* redefines the rules and acts as a commentary on how our world needs to change—especially in terms of how Black and brown bodyminds are often ignored, not believed, and pushed to the margins. Like Lauren, we are told that our pain is not real, that our trauma is not real, and that being vulnerable is perceived as a weakness. I build on Schalk's project because of the value of exploring the relationship between bodyminds and ecologies. I keep finding my way back to this concept because of how the "toxic" and invisible effects of the environment affect both the body and the psyche. While Schalk doesn't explicitly name an eco-feminist lens within her project, she models close-reading techniques in examining how one's environment plays a significant role in how marginalized bodies become racialized, gendered, and/or disabled. In exploring the relationship between ecologies and bodyminds, we are able to reimagine an otherwise that becomes visible once we see the value in how representations matter.

*Parable of the Sower* constructs a normative world for those deemed desirable, and those that are rich, white, and able-bodied are separated from the rest of the world by high-levels of security and fortress-like, gated communities. This segregation allows for the uplifting of a percentage of the population while those that are considered *problems* are left to wither away in a separate, non-normative environment. As a Black and disabled woman, Lauren is forced to conceal her true self by “passing” as an able-bodied man during her migration north—just as our ancestors felt compelled to alter themselves during the Black migration in the twentieth century.

Lauren spends most of the novel hidden behind the veil, unable to reconcile her two selves until a new environment is made possible through the development of her Earthseed manifesto: “This world is falling apart. You could help me begin something purposeful and constructive” (Butler 275). Here, Lauren discusses her ideas of the future with Bankole, one of the men who has joined her group migrating north. Lauren’s Earthseed manifesto rejects the notion of a normative world. Instead of attempting to repair the damage, it seeks to create an alternative space built on the premise of a “unifying, purposeful life” (Butler 261).

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois expresses during a moment of enlightenment that he would be able to “sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (Du Bois 76). I posit Lauren Olamina at this same table to argue that she possesses the same desires for truth, philosophy, and strivings for a “larger, juster and fuller future” (Du Bois 75). Similarly to how people might see Du Bois’ novel as an instructional tool for the training and progression of Black males, Butler’s positioning of the main protagonist, Lauren Olamina, represents the power of Black female leadership in relation to social regeneration. *Parable of the Sower* ends with Lauren and the members of her Earthseed community reaching their new home in the coastal hills of Humboldt County. Their arrival marks the moment the veil is lifted and Lauren is able to merge her two selves together. In this new world, Lauren is able to become whole and proves that it is *natural* for a Black, disabled woman to be a leader at the forefront of change.

### **“The Past is Never Past”**

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois enriches his collection of essays by beginning each chapter with a sorrow song. The selection of songs are placed in an epigraphic manner to supplement Du Bois’ thoughts while simultaneously providing a new way of sensorially accessing the text. In the chapter “Of the Sorrow Songs,” he states: “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men” (Du Bois 177).

The Sorrow Songs viscerally capture the experiences, emotions, and souls of our ancestors, and they still live on in our hearts today. Du Bois calls this a gift, labeling the Black women and men who came before us as geniuses for their ability to articulate messages in this way. These Sorrow Songs serve as a reminder that moving toward the future is not possible without a reconciliation with the past. The “haunting echo” of these songs reminds us that spiritual remnants of our ancestors are entangled in the world around us, making the environment a site of Black memory. Time isn’t linear for Black folks and requires a return.

In *Ecomelancholia: Slavery, War, and Black Ecological Imaginings*, Black scholar Jennifer James writes that “Memory permeates black landscape. It walks out of rivers, rises up in oceans, grows in flowers and in fields, rolls back as stone. Memory becomes a part of the natural world” (James 163). As the veil shuts us out from the rest of the world, Black people become estranged from their ancestral connection to Black memory, to the natural world. However, in *Touching the Earth*, bell hooks reminds us that Black folks have always been first and foremost a people of the land.<sup>3</sup> Dr. James builds on the Freudian concept of memory and, in her own words, terms “ecomelancholia” as the “inability or unwillingness to stop mourning ecological loss and losses associated with the land in a present where loss continues” (James 166). Likewise, Du Bois cautions that we must develop the souls of our people, as this *loss* poses a threat to possibilities for social regeneration. Ecomelancholia is a process of mourning, a refusal to forget until we have relinquished our connection to the past. While “eco” refers to ecologies, I argue it could also signify its own “echo” of haunting melodies that reverberate throughout time and space. It is these forgotten and dispersed spirits that we should turn to, for they have guided us into new worlds and have taught us how to survive. Finally, as we imagine a Black world of life for us, we must lift the veil, become whole, and carry the memory of the past with us always.

### **Conclusion—“othermothering us back to life”**

This article is the act of lifting the veil and becoming whole. This project serves as a reminder of the past, our memories, and the many lifetimes that run through our veins. Most importantly, this project builds on the labor of Black scholars, theorists, activists, and women to highlight the possibilities of Black world-making and futurity. By placing W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* in conversation, it was my intention to juxtapose two different apocalypses and how resistance is formed in response to each of their respective environments, timelines, and spaces. I wanted to stress the importance of the inclusion of Black women voices in Du Bois’ text to highlight the presence of Black female leadership and the power that it wields in shaping the future—just as we can read through Butler’s use of Lauren Olamina. I think of Dr. Barbara Ransby’s *Making All Black Lives Matter* and her captivating question of “What do we do next?” when thinking about reimagining freedom in the twenty-first century. Her work centralizes Black feminist politics as the root of all change, and I am reminded that this is our starting point if we are to move forward. To construct a Black world, to attain liberation, would mean to see the world in and through Black women—because in breaking their chains lies the answer. Black women, for as long as I can remember, have “othermothered” us into a space of being and becoming, and it is this power that liberates our souls and gives us hope for the future.

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. *Belonging: a Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2009.

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