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**The Prophetic Element: Writing Through The Past, The Present, And The Future By
Using Radical Imagination**

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School
of Texas Southern University

By

Stevens Orozco, B.A.

Texas Southern University

2021

Approved by

Dr. Alexis Brooks de Vita
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

Dr. Gregory H. Maddox
Dean, The Graduate School

Approved By

Dr. Alexis Brooks de Vita
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

5-5-2021
Date

Dr. Iris Lancaster
Committee Member

5-5-2021
Date

Dr. Charlene Evans
Committee Member

5-5-2021
Date

Dr. Michael Zeitler
Committee Member

5-5-2021
Date

Dr. Nupur Chaudhuri
Committee Member

5-5-2021
Date

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**The Prophetic Element: Writing Through The Past, The Present, And The Future By
Using Radical Imagination**

By

Stevens Orozco, M.A.

Texas Southern University, 2021

Dr. Alexis Brooks de Vita, Advisor

In exploring the connections between the literary arts and the history of society, Stevens Orozco points to the existence of a prophetic element within the works of writers such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Octavia E. Butler. By tracing the history of society through a linear path of published and canonized works, Orozco argues that the molding of society throughout history is a result of the manipulation of identities and narratives that has established the foundation for the historically dominant culture in literature, philosophy, and government. In response to this manipulation, Orozco demonstrates how the recent works of American writers such as Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler have executed a practice of radical imagination in order to reclaim identity, narrative, and history. This practice of radical imagination produces a forward vision consciousness that addresses the status of contemporary society and future obstacles that lie ahead.

Keywords: Prophetic Literature, Literary Analysis, Social Analysis, Historical Analysis, Political Analysis, Radical Imagination, Social Media, Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, The American Civil War, Black Lives Matter, Right Wing Extremism, and White Supremacy

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VITA

2017.....Bachelor of Arts
Texas Southern University
Houston, TX

Major Field.....History
Minor Field.....Women’s Studies

2015.....Associates of Arts
Lone Star College CyFair
Cypress, TX

Major Field.....Teaching Generalized

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Dedicated to all those who seek to mold the future into a better place through the power of their wills, their communities, and our collective radical imagination.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The need for certainty has been a leading psychological catalyst for many of the groundbreaking discoveries and historical endeavors that have contributed to advancements in cultural, scientific, and political thought. The psychological mechanism that pushes for the affirming of certainty is in itself an instinct for survival. The need to secure oneself from discomfort, pain, suffering, and death is the reason for many of the decisions one makes on a daily basis. The contribution of religion and spirituality exists to help achieve a sense of certainty for the afterlife when death is no longer avoidable. This instinct for survival exists beyond the individual's personal micro experience, and it expands outwardly into the macro realm of society through the historical decisions of communities, governments and empires. In literature, the conflicts and struggles to achieve a sense of certainty have been the basis for many of the most celebrated narratives that have been written since the early expressions of human thought. The effect society has had on writers through these mechanisms of micro and macro impulses for survival have been the cultural influences for these stories and in many instances have reciprocated a return effect from the writer on to the society that consumes the literary work in question. As a result of a growing canon of historically influential works, many critics and philosophers have attempted to find methods for using literature as a measuring tool for achieving an accurate reading on society, its condition, and its inevitable direction and fate.

One cannot apply literature as a measuring tool without the framing of the scientific approach. The need to identify the elements in a literary work that can be applied onto others becomes the search for the equation that can yield the same results over and over again. The task of achieving such a formula can become daunting when attempting to apply it across different

cultures, identities, and nations. In the last century alone, the literary canon has expanded across the world with contributions from writers of different languages and philosophies, which can complicate the formula's application and yield results that do not equate to one another in the long run. This is why the status of the scientific approach to literature has found itself well represented by the life and career of French critic and historian Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine. During his full and distinguished academic career, Taine published the first volume of *The History of English Literature* in 1863. In its introduction Taine provides his scientific approach for literature with the goal of successfully predicting future trends in society by presenting the formula of race-milieu-moment. This formula would be criticized and disregarded by fellow philosophers, sociologists, and critics due to its vagueness and limited scope for accurately predicting social trends. Since his death in 1893, Taine's formula has gained potential when considering the conditions that define the formula itself upon closer examination. The elements when applied more specifically to the social setting and the writer of the literary work being analyzed, begin to cross over one another and produce a new element that can be considered to be the result that Taine once hoped to achieve.

Even though Taine's contributions to literary criticism, historical analysis, and sociological theories have earned him the title of founder of the sociological science of literature, the discarding of his race-milieu-moment formula for literary analysis has been largely due to the wide scope that it sets over any given literary work to be examined. Additionally, this process triggers the possibility of discovering numerous external variables to determine the formula itself. This can result in a new endeavor for analysis that can change from one literary work to the other, and causes the reliability of the scientific process to miss its predictable mark. There are plenty of shortcomings within the original writings for race-milieu-moment. For example,

Taine's concept of race was centered on a nationalistic identity defined by his European experience as a French citizen who observed wars and politics between the French race, German race, and English race. The concept of moment relied on the presence of an action or movement that seems to fit more comfortably with the understanding of the timing of such movement, action, or in this case, the production and delivery of a work of literature. It is the concept of milieu where critics of Taine found the most plausible usefulness even though when included into the formula itself, the support for the argument falls apart. In his journal article "Hippolyte Taine's Literary Theory and Criticism," René Wellek expounds on this concept's usefulness by stating: "The term "milieu" is the only one which has preserved its usefulness and has survived intact. It is a catch-all for the external conditions of literature: it includes not only the physical environment (soil, climate), but also political and social conditions. It is a conglomerate of everything which even remotely can be brought into contact with literature" (Wellek, "Hippolyte Taine's Literary Theory and Criticism," 2). In considering these criticisms and analysis of Taine's formula, the understanding of each of its concepts begin to expand when applying the supportive argument for milieu on to the concepts of race and moment. The goal now becomes: if many factors can determine what is milieu, then by considering multiple factors to analyze race and moment, one can begin to find more clarity on how to apply Taine's formula with more success than previously achieved.

In applying the logic expressed by Wellek when defining milieu as containing the factors of the political, social, climate, power dynamics, and environment, the factors for "race" can be identified as: person, people (as a collective), identity, and spirit. For moment the factors will rely on: timing, execution, action, and movement. These factors collectively when applied to any given literary work can change in measurements and quality that will not be the same depending

on the work, writer, or the moment of its publication. The idea is to learn the categories in which these factors can thrive in the most when using Taine's formula for future literary analysis. This process produces a larger understanding about the role of literature in society, its impact, and its needs for effective story telling. These sociological studies in literature become an analytical journey that moves beyond the page and considers the external environment in such ways to identify attempts to satisfy the need for certainty. This journey inspires works of philosophy and history to merge with the academic labor within the arts and literature. As a result, the impulse to satisfy the instinct for survival creates a need to find what ultimately Taine expressed as the desired outcome: to quantify the ability to predict future trends and civilizations by analyzing literature. When tightening the scope of analysis on a specific piece of literary work and applying Taine's formula with all of its considerable factors, the emergence of a new element becomes evident and is embodied by the writer themselves, the prophetic element.

Writers are a product of their social experiences and settings. These social settings and experiences are molded by the historical events that shape the political and cultural trends during a writer's lifetime. Taine's formula attempted to measure these factors and employs milieu to cover most of the variables. The ability to predict future trends and social movements would require a writer to have a deep and intimate understanding of history and society. This understanding requires both great discipline in study methods, as well as the access to sharpen these study habits and abilities. For many historical philosophers in the past three centuries, examining the lifespan of historical civilizations to find shared patterns and parallels seem to remain a consistent practice. This practice can also be historically identified across a large span of literary works. This search for patterns and parallels led Taine to align his principles of history with those developed by historian and philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Since his

death in 1831, Hegel's works and analysis on history and philosophy have laid the foundation for all future philosophical and political thought. Historians Arnold J. Toynbee, Pitirim Sorokin, and Oswald Spengler have explored the Hegelian school for examining history through out their respective careers. Taine and Spengler are more closely aligned with Hegel's identifying "that history recurs in cycles: that civilizations rise, flower, and decline like organisms" (Wellek, "Hippolyte Taine's Literary Theory and Criticism," 12). With this historical lens and understanding, a writer can begin the process of identifying the future trends of their time as they create works that speak to their generation's events. The identifying of their historical stage can help them envision future possibilities that will come to pass. This ability shapes how writers employ themselves as the prophetic element within Taine's formula, and as a result respond to the variables that determine their social experiences and settings.

The Hegelian scope to view history through the identifying of stages in a cycle has been used by historians to exam the lifespan of ancient civilizations. Spengler identifies the cycles for: "the Egyptian, the Classical, the Magian, the Western, and the Russian" (Northrup, "'The Decline of the West' by Oswald Spengler," 5), while also admitting to knowing little of Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, and pre-Columbia American developments. These are large periods of time that have scarcely documented social experiences and settings, which make it difficult for a highly accurate social reading. The writers of these early periods of civilization often have had the privilege of access to the knowledge and materials required to document their social experiences and settings. The earlier the period, the less likely we are to hear from the voices of those without the education or access. This means plenty of variables are missing for an accurate read of the milieu. The closer we move towards the present day we find more and more increased documenting of human activity, thought, and creativity. The literary arts begin to contribute

higher numbers of works as society experiences the shifts and revolutionary consequences of historical events like the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the last century alone, American society has experienced its own rise in world history as both leader and antagonist. The recent accelerated rate in technological advancements for communication and media have led to increased cultural awareness and social movements that have sparked many to identify a declining stage for American dominance.

For American writers James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Octavia E. Butler, the decline of America has been warned, identified, and envisioned through out their careers. Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler employed radical imagination in their works as they grappled with the social, political, and cultural conditions of their time. For Baldwin, it was his personal narratives and memoirs during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that provided the milieu for his prophetic element to function and influence future trends. Morrison challenged how storytelling and identity functioned within the literary arts and influenced future cultural and social trends. The science fiction and speculative fiction of Butler blazed a forward narrative that spoke to the present day with prophetic accuracy and looked to the cosmos as the next escape. For the United States of America, the consequences of its historical social movements since the Civil War, have led to the social experiences and settings that have produced an American milieu that can fall into the previous historical cycles of decline, or it can find new trends in the works of American writers who evoke the prophetic element to warn of the fall. When employing Taine's formula in the present day scope of the U.S., writers like Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler can help lead future positive trends by using radical imagination.

CHAPTER 2

APPLICATION OF TAINE'S FORMULA

It has been one-hundred-and-fifty-eight years since Taine introduced his conceptual formula for literary quantification and analysis. Since 1863, most European monarchies have been abolished or have transitioned into constitutional monarchies after the rise of republicanism and a spring of social revolutions. World history has been transformed by the formation of sovereign nations through anti-colonial rebellions and world wars. Technology has also advanced beyond the imagination of what the society of Taine's lifetime could have ever dreamed of. The ability to document, create literary content, and distribute on a worldwide massive scale has now become possible through the use of computer technology and the Internet super highway. This last component is vital to understanding the gap that had existed in accessibility for those who did not belong to the higher class of society, who often were the only ones with the resources to secure the education and the means to distribute the literary works during the earlier centuries of human history. These empowering advancements in social conditions and technology that have occurred over the past century and a half have added to the conditions needed for Taine's formula to begin to produce the predictive results that it was intended to.

The scientific approach relies on the precision of all of the elements involved in any given theory, formula, or experiment. The expectation of a specific result depends on the same variables functioning identically under each attempted calculation. For Taine, his attempts to predict future trends and civilizations with the works available to him during the nineteenth-century would yield him no results to validate his race-milieu-moment formula. This revision argues that Taine did not have the precision required to produce meaningful prophetic results.

Writers, scholars, and academic critics today are not limited by the lack of data and also the lack of high-speed data, which helps process the elements required for a more precise analysis. In the effort to assist in the understanding of what can be considered as data for precise analysis under the Taine formula, the following chart provides an extension to the three elements introduced by Taine:

Race	Milieu	Moment
Person	Social Conditions	Timing
People	Political Environment	Execution
Identity	Power Dynamics	Action
Spirit	Climate	Movement
Nation	Culture	Technology

With this extension in mind, the elements of race and milieu can be identified as the areas of human life in which academia has recorded, studied, and documented for future scholarly analysis. Any of the sub-elements under these two elements are subjects in which sociology, psychology, and anthropology have engaged in rigorous analysis and study over the last two centuries. This has created a wealth of information and data for writers and scholars to enrich their understanding of human life and civilization. The element of moment is where the activity of any given country, society or population can influence or react to a work by a writer who processed the data available to them and produced a response to any of the targeted social conditions of their time. The sub-element of technology can be argued to have the most impactful significance to human history as the evolution of media has moved from broadcast radio, television, and now the Internet and social media. These technological advancements have enabled generations of people who only one century ago, would not have had the opportunity to

access, process, and produce information at the growing speed of human evolution. This monumental shift in technology and mass-information becoming available to many people today is where the power of the writer can shift Taine's formula into a more accurate possibility. In this instance, the writer functions as the Prophetic element that over time has digested enough information and data about their surroundings in order to produce the type of works that can predict future trends and civilizations.

The rise of the information age has enabled and empowered writers with the tools to craft literary works that can speak to their generation, and in the process also share visions of future possibilities for humankind. The time of empires and monarchies that still existed during Taine's lifetime has now transitioned onto the modern era of global sovereign states. This evolution of social, political, and technological conditions has over the past century opened the door for writers to become the most influential element in the formula. This influential power is a result of their ability to digest the race-milieu-moment of their time through extensive research and data collection. The identification of the Prophetic element allows us today the ability to update the formula and visualize it in scientific language as $(rmm)^w$. It is the writer who determines the functionality of the formula and its success. By examining the works of Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler, we can observe how each writer digests specific sub-elements and as a result produces literary works that hold prophetic powers that speak to today's generation of readers and writers.

CHAPTER 3

ON BALDWIN

3.i BALDWIN'S PROPHETIC FIRE

The American identity throughout the history of the United States can be argued to have started as incomplete and slowly gained more accuracy of itself once it entered the twentieth-century. The early works in the American canon reflected many aspects of American life, yet the stories revolved around the Anglo-American experience and mostly the Anglo male experience. During the most significant historical periods of America, it has been the Anglo citizen whose story carried the narrative and the purpose for the American identity. The American Revolution, which culminated with the declaration of independence in 1774, set the marker for the birth of a new nation and future world super power. In keeping with the Hegelian concept of the historical life cycles for civilization, this places the young western country on the path to challenge the old historical glory of past European empires. The American spring had begun as the European powers began to face their predestined life cycle of decay. The concept of race began to take a more sharper and color-based historical significance. Where Taine interpreted race as a nationalistic descriptor between European nations, in America the history of African enslavement and Native American genocide twisted the definition of race along the basis of color lines. The most significant historical event to occur after the American Revolution would be the fight for the abolition of slavery that would trigger the Civil War in 1861. The young American nation would find itself confronted by its silenced voices that—since before its independence from the British monarchy—always completed its true American identity.

It is on the one-hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation when James Baldwin decided to write a letter to his nephew who was celebrating his fifteenth birthday. The

year was 1963 and this letter—titled “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”—was the opening essay to Baldwin’s most celebrated work *The Fire Next Time*, which was released in the same year. This period of American history (1954-1968) is known as the Civil Rights Movement, and Baldwin’s *Fire* would be timely released during the country’s most active political and social tensions since the Abolitionist movement a century before. The moment for Baldwin had been building both for himself personally and for the country, who had been in a secluded denial regarding its institutional racist practices, such as segregation, discrimination, and lynching. For the element of moment in Taine’s formula, the sub-elements required to contain a powerful and effective opportunity for a writer like Baldwin to achieve a successful literary moment in American history—both for its identity and morality—had aligned to match his potent prose and vulnerable criticisms.

The sub-elements of timing, execution, action, movement, and technology are all present for Baldwin’s *Fire*. The timing itself was the year 1963. This historically significant year experienced the March on Washington, the ascension of Rev. Martin Luther King, and the assassination of President John. F. Kennedy. The activism (Action) of thousands of young students and faith leaders mobilized the Civil Rights (Movement) since the late 1950s. The greatest tool for this historical push was the sub-element of technology. The rise of broadcast television would sustain the American public’s attention and horror, as the images of brutal treatment of the African American community began to inspire citizens from across the country to travel to the segregated south and join in to support the movement for equality and unity. The evolution of mass media, which can be traced since the early production of newspapers during the eighteenth-century, experienced a fast leap during the early half of twentieth-century after the

invention of the radio transmission broadcast during the 1920s, and by the 1940s the invention of the television broadcast secured the breakthrough technological advancement for delivering mass information to American households across the country. Societies across the world had now reached the point in history where information was accessible and available in print, audio, and video. The cultural shifts for the future have been laid down for the generations to come after the 1960s. For Baldwin, all three of these forms of media would prove to be the most effective technological tools needed to speak to his present time and provide the prophetic element for the future generations to prepare for and respond to.

The milieu for Baldwin's *Fire* had been forming since the end of the Civil War. For one hundred years the struggle for African American equality had survived through a sabotaged Reconstruction period, the Black Codes that evolved into the Jim Crow era, the Great Migration of southern African Americans into the north and Midwest, and the violent hostility of every new place they would settle in for a better life. In considering the social conditions, political environment, power dynamics, climate, and culture, it can be argued that the treatment of African American people has defined the American identity both socially and politically. In the arts and popular culture, the contributions of the African American community have often led to the theft of their work and the appropriation by the Anglo centered entertainment industry. Early American propaganda would characterize African American people by the use of ignorant and racist tropes that would criminalize them for political purposes. These tropes were also used as an entertainment tool for the purpose to socially condition non-African American people to view the African American identity as dangerous, negative, or ignorant. With the help of Baldwin and other writers, artists, and activists, the Civil Rights movement would begin deconstructing the racist tropes, false narratives, and the dehumanization of African American people. The most

effective method in Baldwin's writing would thrive through his love, vulnerability, righteous anger, and hopeful optimism.

The prophetic element—the writer—functions through its interaction with the milieu and its response to the moment by how it defines itself in the element of race. American history's relationship with race has taken the limited definition of Taine's nationalistic European identifier, and expanded its purpose for the economical and social benefit of the Anglo-American capitalist and elite class. Simply put, the creation of the racial lines between white and black skin began a long and extensive propaganda campaign to demonize an entire racial group of people. This same logic would be applied to dehumanize Native Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and all other non-Anglo immigrant peoples. Since the end of the Civil War, the plight of African America has been based on the intentional repurposing of a freed people to continue the economically beneficial narrative which existence depends on the exploitation of Anglo fear and the dehumanization of the African American identity. Enslaved labor might have ended, but criminal codes were created to target free African Americans in order to build a prison labor force which today functions as an evolved form of chattel slavery. The institutional structure before the Civil War did not end; it only metamorphosed into a different version of itself and continues to rely on the historically established practice of controlling the identity of African Americans through demonization and fear. The power of the moment one hundred years later is that America can now read, hear, and see the African American experience through the voices of its most talented orators and writers.

Baldwin addresses Taine's element of race by filling in the sub-elements of: Person, People, Identity, Spirit, and Nation through the practice of sharing personal stories and inner thoughts, feelings, and fears. This practice followed in the tradition of African American writers

and academics such as Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison. For Baldwin, by embodying the sub-element of person, he is able to reach deeply within himself in order to pull out the human vulnerabilities that have always existed. As a result *The Fire Next Time* serves as a prophetic warning in which Baldwin begins with his most personal duty to warn his own flesh and blood about the country he calls home, and moves forward to warn the country he chooses to confront in the hope of a better future. Baldwin explains to his nephew this fear and sense of identity that both threatens and defines their American experience:

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. (Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9)

In an attempt to relate to the fear felt by Anglo-Americans who have not considered or read an African American person's thoughts on race or living in America, Baldwin draws a comparison between the certainty of the universe and the natural disposition of the stars with the role of African American people in the minds of Anglo-Americans. He does this in order to explain the conditioned fear that is triggered by the Anglo-American's white identity when this role is challenged. By allowing all readers—especially Anglo readers—into this intimate and loving expression towards his nephew James, Baldwin opens a space for a vulnerable journey through

his thoughts on the increasingly tense social setting of the 1960s. After closing his short letter to his nephew, Baldwin continues with “Down At The Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” the second and largest portion of *Fire*, where through the exploration of his spiritual identity he finds himself in search of answers for a nation in need of healing from historical trauma and violence.

America’s Christian identity was a common ground for Baldwin to continue his inner dialogue on race. As a child preacher who practiced and led church service into his teens, Baldwin recounts his conflicts with his faith as he came of age and maturity. “Down At The Cross” also shares a memory from Baldwin’s first time meeting the leader of the Nation of Islam—Elijah Muhammad—while visiting his home in Chicago. As part of the complex Civil Rights Movement, The Nation of Islam rose to greater prominence within the African American community as the ascendance of the charismatic minister Malcolm X provided more national visibility. X countered Rev. King’s philosophy of non-violence with a more militant approach to the threat of institutional racism and state violence. This tension between opposing views within the African American community only drew more national attention and dialogue on race. Baldwin brings in multiple layers of his identity—as an African American and as a Christian—when sharing this memory and his reflections on his encounter with Muhammad. In the closing thoughts in *Fire*, Baldwin ponders on the concept of a vengeance that is inevitable due to the ignorance or inability to stop what may already be predestined. In those closing words Baldwin chooses to lean on his faith and love by optimistically proposing to the reader:

And here we are, at the center of the arc trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and

now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.

(Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105)

With the warning set and the hopeful message placed into the hands of all future readers, Baldwin would embark on the remaining five years in the Civil Rights Movement unaware if the warning and message would be received fast enough to prevent a catastrophe. By the time he publishes *No Name In The Street* in 1972, Malcolm X had been assassinated in 1965, as well as Rev. King in 1968. The Black Power movement and the rise of the Black Panther Party that began in the late 1960s had also experienced a tragic fate by the start of the 1970s. Losing many of its leaders to targeted killings by police or to life sentences as political prisoners. The moment had passed for the country to truly reckon with its American identity and Baldwin wrote as such. This time not warning the readers but merely providing the advice of what may best help them manage what already has been set in motion:

An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill. (Baldwin, *No Name In The Street*, 196)

Many readers and admirers of Baldwin today do not know about his more somber tone that set in later in his life. The acclaim due to *The Fire Next Time* had in a sense frozen him in time along

with his loving optimism that he closes with. The power of Baldwin's *Fire* today is that in many ways, the moment has returned, and it can be argued that it is still open for writers to address the present milieu of American society. With the social and political conditions of the past and the present serving as channels between parallel historical movements and action, the words from Baldwin's *Fire* has caught on and spread onto the recent works of twenty-first-century writers. The prophetic element's success—in this case Baldwin—is the opportunity to compare notes and visions within the responses to the past history and the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement. This opportunity to do this comparison in real time as history seemingly continues to unfold in familiar patterns is where the success of the Prophetic element can be measured.

3.ii STILL BURNING

In search for the prophetic power of a writer's work, Taine desired to identify future trends and civilizations. The formula may not have worked during the nineteenth-century, as the conditions for the sub-elements did not provide enough information and data for the successful function of the prophetic element. The opportunity to connect past trends with present trends depends on the fullness of the historical, social, political, and academic data for writers to present a clearer picture of their current time, along with the visions of the possible futures they can imagine or fear. These visions remain waiting throughout time for the future writers to utilize as part of their own works that speak to a much clearer and more present picture. This practice for admirers of Baldwin has begun to produce many responses to his past visions and fears, which today in American society seem to echo identical trends.

Since 2012, the Black Lives Matter Movement has activated protests and many other forms of civil disobedience in response to the killings of unarmed African American men, women, and children across the country. This uprising and outcry has become a historical event in the tradition of the Abolitionist Movement that led to the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement, which was a response to the rise of Jim Crow laws after the Reconstruction period. The moment had been facilitated by the technology of its time. Social media has enabled the high-speed pace of data and information exchange directly to the cell phones of individuals all across the world. The functions of the newspaper, radio, and television have evolved into online news articles, podcasts, and video-streaming services that are all held together in an individual's cellphone device. This power became the catalyst for the Movement for Black Lives to spread information and organize protests when the deaths of African American people by police began to get captured on cell phone cameras and shared on social media. As the historical, political, and

social consequences began to take shape since the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the writers of this generation began looking for answers to many of the questions raised through the experience of confronting the American milieu around race and nationhood. In this search, many writers began to look to Baldwin for guidance and a deeper understanding of American society.

The influence of Baldwin's *Fire* has been direct for this generation. The power of social media has given Baldwin the elevated status of a prophetic writer. Images with his face designed with different cited quotes from his works, interviews, and speeches have placed Baldwin in the present consciousness of today's young generation. In 2015 writer Ta-Nehisi Coates published *Between The World And Me*, a thirty-one-thousand-word letter to his fifteen-year-old son in which Coates shares his vulnerable and intimate thoughts on growing up in America as an African American. This direct reflection to Baldwin's letter to his fifteen-year-old nephew becomes the first link between the past and present American writers. But Coates has read and studied Baldwin before publishing *Between The World And Me*, the lessons from Baldwin's *No Name* along with the somber tone can be felt in Coates reflections throughout his letter. In characterizing the American Dream as the desire for safety through whiteness, Coates describes both Anglo and African American people who desire to live disconnected from the harsh reality of institutional racism—for Anglo-Americans through the sense of racial superiority and for all non-Anglo Americans through the safety of wealth and affluence—as Dreamers who have bought into the Dream. In the opening portion of the letter, Coates shares his memory of an interview he participated to discuss the rising protests and outrage over the killings of African American people, when asked regarding having hope Coates reflects on his struggle to cope with the cycle he saw himself living through and that his son had become aware of:

And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you. (Coates, *Between The World And Me*, 11)

As Coates navigates through his memories, lessons, and reflections in an attempt to make sense of the world for his young son, there is a consistent framing for the Dream that is accomplished. The American Dream that was built through an infinite number of untold stories of suffering and exploitation has itself evolved with the times and the advancements of technology. The altered and romanticized history of the Civil Rights Movement has opened spaces for the inclusion of representation and access, but it also has come at a cost. Coates identifies this cost as he closes his letter to his son with what is his own prophetic warning. Like Baldwin's *Fire*, Coates extends the urgency for change that will not just save America, but also the rest of the world:

Once, the Dream's parameters were caged by technology and by the limits of horsepower and wind. But the Dreamers have improved themselves, and the damming of seas for voltage, the extraction of coal, the transmuting of oil into food, have enabled an expansion in plunder with no known precedent. And this revolution has freed the Dreamers to plunder not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself. The Earth is not our creation. It has no respect for us. It has no use for us. And its vengeance is not the fire in the cities but the fire in the sky. (Coates, *Between The World And Me*, 150)

In the spirit of Baldwin's characterization of the individual's role and responsibility as a midwife to a new world being born, Coates instructs just the same while continuing his warning: "The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all. The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos" (Coates, *Between The World And Me*, 151). Yet in 2015, America had still only begun this new historical cycle for writers to observe and produce responses to the moment they are living in.

If Coates' Dream requires an awakening in which the American consciousness must experience, then the role of the writers as the disturbers of the sleeping state of American consciousness is solidified by the work produced during this effort. Like the protests and the acts of civil disobedience springing up across the country, these writers are disrupting the Dream for the sake that the warnings both past and present can help secure a better future. In 2016 writer Jesmyn Ward curated and published a collection of works by a young generation of writers seeking to echo the call from Baldwin by publishing *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. Ward's intention to provide a collection of works that speaks to past, present, and future visions of America was a response to the similar feeling of helplessness that had begun to affect many African-American people during the rise of the Movement for Black Lives. In the introduction Ward reflects on the mission of the collection of works by writing:

We're tired of feeling futile in the face of this ever-present danger, this omnipotent history, predicated as this country is, founded as this country was, on our subjugation. But the pieces in this work that do invoke the future...help me believe that I might be able to have that conversation with my child in the future.

These pieces give me words that I might use to push past the fear and exhaustion and speak to my daughter, my nieces and nephews. This work helps me to believe that this is worthwhile work, and that our troubling the water is worthy. (Ward, *The Fire This Time*, 9)

By repurposing Baldwin's title for *Fire*, and centering the focus on the dialogue with her daughter, nieces, and nephew, Ward is following in the tradition established by Baldwin's letter to his nephew. Coates and Ward sought to speak to the younger generation in America who will be inheriting the state and contradictions of their conditional freedom and identity. These early efforts during this new moment in American history were neither fully prepared nor aware of the harsh turn that electoral politics would take, and as a result the milieu began to shift towards a more racially charged and hostile social condition. The 2016 presidential election of former reality TV personality Donald Trump would spark a new stage in the cycle of American history, disrupting the Dreamers who had not yet awakened to their current state of American society.

In the wake of the election of President Trump there had been a rise in the formation of hate groups and right-wing militias, legislative efforts to disenfranchise African American voters, and racially charged rhetoric spreading across social media. These can be considered as correlated or as a direct response to the growing mobilization by the Movement for Black Lives. Across the country, conversations on race, discrimination, and institutional racism have become battle lines once again for political ideologies to misuse and often exploit to provoke further outrage and division. These tense times have called for some to revisit the past in order to find the answers to many of the current questions that have begun to accumulate. One of those seeking answers in Baldwin's past writings is professor Eddie S. Glaude Jr. During his journey to write a biographical work on Baldwin, Glaude began to put together the pieces of what may be

the help needed to address the current tense political climate that has become more toxic since 2016. Glaude writes of an after times concept that he drew from the writings of Walt Whitman—the period directly after the Civil War when America has the opportunity for a new life. Glaude places America in the repeated cycle of an after times for his present day and looks to Baldwin’s own experience and lifetime:

Baldwin wrote in another after times—that of the collapse of the civil rights movement, bearing witness to a time when many thought the nation was poised to change, only to have darkness descend and change arrested. Grief and trauma joined with disappointment as Baldwin watched white Americans turn away from the difficulties of genuine change, often embracing a nostalgic appeal for simpler days, when black people knew their place and weren’t in the streets protesting, in order to justify their refusal to give up the lie. (Glaude, *Begin Again*, 16)

The lie that Glaude refers to is the same Dream that Coates frames in his letter to his son. The fallout from the Civil Rights Movement and its painful realization is felt in Baldwin’s *No Name* as the assassinations and political persecution of the leaders fed his disillusionment. Glaude considers Baldwin’s recognition of decay in American society that had begun to settle as the conscience of the nation moved on from the plight of its African American people. Still taking heed of Baldwin’s warning and reframing it for today’s American society, Glaude seeks to motivate the reader to take up the responsibility for the task ahead: “Ours, like the moments after the Civil War and Reconstruction and after the civil rights movement, requires a different kind of thinking, a different kind of resiliency, or else we succumb to madness or resignation. Baldwin, I believe, offers resources to respond to such dark times and to imagine an answer to the moral reckoning that confronts us all” (Glaude, *Begin Again*, xxiv). Baldwin believed in the individual

responsibility of each person for the moment of America's reckoning. For himself, he responded to the responsibility to document the work of the Civil Rights Movement and its active participants. When reflecting on his internal conflict with his role he states: "I was never in town to stay. This was sometimes hard on my morale, but I had to accept, as time wore on, that part of my responsibility—as a witness—was to move as largely and as freely as possible, to write the story, and get it out" (Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 31). The role of a writer when in their full power is to absorb all of the elements of their time, of their nation, their moment, and respond to it for their current and future society. Baldwin's power was in his artistry and prose. His contribution to his moment in American history was to bear witness to it as it unfolds and produce the work that will speak to future trends and civilizations. Glaude describes Baldwin's effort both as an artist and a writer who shares his humanness with his critiques of America by stating:

He is not only motivated to transform the stuff of experience into the beauty of art; as a poet also *bears witness* to what he sees and what we have forgotten, calling our attention to the enduring legacies of slavery in our lives; to the impact of systemic discrimination throughout the country that has denied generations of black people access to the so-called American dream; to the willful blindness of so many white Americans to the violence that sustains it all. He laments the suffering that results from our evasions and refusals and passes judgment on what we have done and not done in order to release ourselves into the possibility of becoming different and better people. He bears witness for those who cannot because they did not survive, and he bears witness for those who survived it all, wounded and broken. (Glaude, *Begin Again*, 40)

In the later half of Baldwin's career, the tone of his writing had been interpreted as less hopeful and not as optimistic as he had been during the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Yet he continued to write motivated by the labor of love that only an artist may understand. When his warning in *Fire* was not heeded, he pivoted to encourage readers to prepare for the decay and the mess that will follow after the death of the old world is complete. Even after watching the opportunity for change come and go, he continued to observe the cycle of American history and recognize that plenty of work is yet to be done.

Glaude's analysis is a helpful blueprint to identify the Hegelian cycle of civilization for America. The cycle that has repeated through the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and today's current Movement for Black Lives has aligned the milieu together once again through the timing of America's repeated moment. The advancement of technology has granted America with not just another opportunity for change, but new forms of media to receive the past warning of historical voices and figures. In 2016, filmmaker Raoul Peck used thirty pages of Baldwin's writings from 1979 that were intended to become the basis for a book in which Baldwin recounts his memory and relationships with Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Peck would create a documentary film that edited Baldwin's words, plus interviews, and the images from the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter protests to visually demonstrate the parallels of these two historical American periods. It is in these modern efforts to revive Baldwin's words into today's present effort to achieve the aspirations of the African American spirit from past liberationist efforts that these revisits and revivals of Baldwin's work have solidified his status as one of America's most important thinkers, writers, and artists. His work has helped other writers and artists speak to their generation and set the sights for future generations to aim for. Baldwin makes his readers responsible for their decisions, morality, and

politics by placing them fully not just in his time of American history, but even further immersed in their own present moment of American history.

“History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We *are* our history.

If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals”

(Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 107)

CHAPTER 4 ON MORRISON

CHAPTER 4.i MORRISON'S FLIGHT

In October of 1993 African American writer Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. This prize marks the highest recognition for a writer by an international audience of readers, critics, and scholars. For Morrison, this was the culmination of a twenty-three year literary career that expanded the scope of American literature, a career that also along the way helped mold its identity. Morrison's literary journey began during the twilight of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. American consciousness had been awakened to a dangerously tense social climate. This tension had been stirred by the opposing reactions to the efforts for social equality by the African American community since the mid-1950s. By 1970, the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and both President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy had left the nation's morale for change emotionally exhausted. The leaders of the Black Panther Party had also been targeted through politically motivated killings and imprisonment. The milieu of the nation had shifted from the optimistic pace for unity in its racial conversation, into a more politically charged stand off between communities who did not know one another well. The moment for writers to capture the ability to predict future trends and civilizations had passed and the history of the 1960s was set for future revisions, manipulations and reimaginings. The release of Morrison's first published novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 would be the beginning of the formation of a new moment in American literature and history, a moment in which Morrison's prophetic abilities would be on full display through her artistic use of language.

At the moment when Morrison's career and work were being honored and celebrated in 1993, she had published six novels, a play, a short story, and a collection of critical essays. These works have been the foundation for the expansion of the American identity that Morrison challenged through her artistic practice of narrative. In shaping compelling characters and stories that shed light on the lived experiences of African American people, Morrison reveals the vulnerabilities and strengths within its diverse identity. Her success is a reflection of her ability as an artist to create from her own experiences, knowledge of history, and imagination.

American literary historian Trudier Harris writes about Morrison's impact on the literary imagination in response to her historic Nobel celebration by stating: "Around the world, she has offered a new lens through which to view American literature and African American experience. Morrison's is the rare case in which popularity and quality are commensurate" (Harris, "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History," 9). In 1991, Harris' book length study titled *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, added to what had become an international interest for deeper analysis of Morrison's work. When Harris began her study in 1981, Morrison had published four novels and had not yet become a household name. By 1991 when Harris published her study, Morrison's most notable and celebrated novel *Beloved* had been released, and her place in American literary history had been secured.

By the time of the release of her sixth novel *Jazz* in 1992, Morrison had established herself firmly within the canon of American literature through the weaving of compelling, complex, and historically interconnected experiences of African American people. With *Jazz*, Morrison continued evolving her ability to experiment with language and employed a narrative style that broke out of literary tradition, writing in a style that sets a pace and rhythm that mimic the unpredictable musical flow played by a jazz musician. With six novels Morrison was able to

exhibit her ability to tell six different and compellingly human stories through the use of a diverse range of narrative styles that placed her potent execution of language on display for readers around the world. Harris reflects on Morrison's literary success while grounding it within the oral tradition historically practiced by African American communities when stating:

When all the reading is done, when all the stories are told, what remains is language, Morrison's superior ability to weave tales, her uncanny skill at giving distinctive voices to a variety of characters across class, race, and educational levels. Scholars and readers have repeatedly commented on Morrison's storytelling ability, and she credits the gift in part to the tradition of oral storytelling that surrounded her growing up in Ohio. That orality became immersed in the alembic of Morrison's literate imagination to give us words, phrases, and images that linger in our memories. (Harris, "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History," 13)

These stories and traditions are what separate Morrison's work from the rest of the traditional American canon that pre-dates the 1970s. The power of Morrison's narratives is that they reveal and cement the parts of American history and identity that had been denied, erased, or rewritten. Morrison's greatest example of this exposure of American identity can be argued to be her 1987 novel *Beloved*. The inspiration of the novel is the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved African American woman who during the pre-Civil War nineteenth-century escaped from the South with her family, only to be surrounded by U.S. Marshals while inside of a cabin. Faced with the reality of returning to enslavement, Garner kills her own infant daughter and is taken in to face a complicated trial process that argued between the destruction of property and the killing of a human being. Morrison takes this real life historical tragedy and reimagines the story of

Sethe—who is loosely based on Garner—and the ghost of her infant daughter Beloved. Readers of *Beloved* could not unlearn the tragedy of American chattel slavery and its complex web of inhumane brutality after joining Sethe’s journey through grief and forgiveness. Harris notes regarding the novel’s historical impact on the American identity: “Indeed, Morrison has written a national epic with a twist, firmly rooting black people in the polluted American soil of their slave heritage and transforming that soil to a garden of possibility through the tremendous force of the human will to survive and to thrive. She has thereby reclaimed America for the best of itself” (Harris, “Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History,” 10). Morrison’s talent for demonstrating the beauty of the African American experience—through both tragedy and joy—has reclaimed its place in American history for every historical revision that lacked or skipped the stories of the people who have lived through all of its stages. Her novels provide a more detailed and full picture of what had been a romanticized memory of America where the identity of African Americans had been oversimplified in its revision.

As Morrison’s work began to open the American consciousness to the untold stories of the African American community, the revisiting of classical American literature became more urgent for the recognition of the nation’s true identity. The reach of Morrison’s artistic abilities for the purpose of unlearning manufactured and incomplete American history would be paired with her scholarly work to examine the American literary canon for purposes that are just as important to the nation’s identity.

4.ii ON MATTERS OF RACE

The expansion of identities in the literary arts through diverse stories enabled the creation of more spaces for dialogue on how identity had been misused or irresponsibly mishandled. The power of new and unexpected voices in the spaces of old tradition is one that leads to the reshaping of the dominant antiquated tradition. In the case of American literature, the old traditions have a history of centering Eurocentric and male voices. The literary work and criticisms of Morrison have helped lead the disruption of these old and narrow traditions that have often escaped sharp scrutiny and revising. In her literary criticism titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison shares her development and identification of the Africanist presence in American literary tradition. This critical lens has since its introduction helped identify potential risks of erasure, mischaracterizations, and false equivalences when writing contemporary fiction. In the long term, this identification has also helped revisit what the American identity truly is made of, what it has lacked, and how it will look moving forward.

Morrison argues that the creation of this literary archetype for African American identity—The Africanist Presence—has come to signify who African American people are, as well as covering “the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these (African American) people” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 65). Through these assumptions and misreadings, the purpose of this Africanist presence’s function is understood as a contrast to the protagonists and/or settings that represent America, in viewing the African American as un-American. By highlighting this Africanist presence and its purpose, writers and scholars can now identify potential risks of erasure, mischaracterizations, and false equivalences when writing contemporary fiction. This understanding serves as a

blueprint to facilitate more responsible writing about the identities of diverse peoples and cultures beyond the African diaspora.

The publication of *Playing in the Dark* came as a result of three William E. Massey Sr. Lectures that were given at Harvard University in 1992. The tension between Morrison's identity as an African American and as an American writer is at the core of her motivation to cultivate this study on the Africanist presence, the white gaze, and the literary imagination. For the preface Morrison reflects on her decision to explore this concept further by revealing: "I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, x-xi). As Morrison expands on her practice of recognizing the Africanist presence, she educates through her criticisms and deconstruction of classic American canonical works by Herman Melville, Willa Cather, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ernest Hemingway. Morrison educates about how American literary identity is constructed by misusing African American identity as a blank canvass of sorts to juxtapose itself and create a heroic Eurocentric literary image and classic canon.

In expanding beyond the literary arts, Morrison makes the argument that the political and historical identity of America has been pushed forward through its confrontation with freedom, race and equality. Morrison states: "The literature of the United States, like its history, represents commentary on the transformations of biological, ideological, and metaphysical concepts of racial difference" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 65). This understanding stands true when considering the writing of the constitution, the fight for legislative representation, the creation of public education and such other social advancements that require the moral reflection of equality

for all identities. Morrison highlights how literary language is manipulated for the racializing of American identity within its political and social history by arguing: “Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6). By making this crucial connection, Morrison places the role of early American literature as a conscious co-conspirator to the Anglo centered identity of the nation’s manipulated birth story. She continues exposing this historical connection of manufactured American identity by highlighting: “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6). This solidifies Morrison’s ability to connect the reflection and influence of language to a nation’s identity. The most urgent understanding becomes in learning to identify when that connection has been misused or manipulated for the enforcement of the subjugation and oppression of marginalized identities. The significance of this literary criticism of the American canon then becomes a call to revisit the true history of the American identity and its politics. Morrison had begun to create a shift towards a new cultural moment for the nation, and for many writers and scholars listening, she sparked a new trend in academic studies.

The expansion of critical race studies—through the literary analysis of Morrison and her observations on whiteness in the literary imagination—has contributed to an increase of white studies in other academic fields since the 1990s. The examination of how whiteness functions in history, sociology, politics, psychology and other academic disciplines has become a post-

modern practice that Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* helped elevate into greater visibility. This academic trend is crucial for the understanding of the American identity on race since the definition of itself has long been separated from the Eurocentric roots of nationhood. In a research study on whiteness, professors Tammie M. Kennedy, Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe clarify the difference of race in America when compared to European identity: "Although race initially referred to ethnic groups (as in the Irish race), by the time the US Constitution was signed in 1787, race had shifted to signify color and blood as designators of biological differences. Within the cultural logic of white supremacy, these so-called biological differences were employed to justify social and economic hierarchies: That is, "white people" were presumed to be the superior race" (Kennedy, et al, "The Matter of Whiteness," 365). This deconstruction of the use of blackness and whiteness in the formation of American history through the use of language becomes a priority for the evolution of the nation's future identity. Morrison reflects on this responsibility by stating "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 13). In recognizing the misuse of racialized language, Morrison has identified the battle line for future writers and scholars to unravel and separate the words of the past for a more responsible use of language in the future.

Today, nearly thirty years after giving her lectures on whiteness and the literary imagination, there is now a vast collection of works on white studies, critical race studies, and other identity based studies that have provided deconstruction, rebuttals, and expansions to the understandings of past historical use of manipulated language across all academic disciplines. Morrison's success in both writing American literature and analyzing its identity is the evidence

of her influential ability to shape the American identity and elevate the culture to a new moment in history that would lead her to the highest honor as a writer.

4.iii NARRATIVE

On October 7, 1993 Toni Morrison accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature and gave a lecture to the guests present for the ceremony in her honor. This historic moment of recognition and praise was the result of over two decades of work totaling six novels that expanded the identity of the American canon, becoming the tenth American writer to receive the prize, and the second woman to do so. But Morrison was the first and remains the only African American writer to receive the highest international honor in literature. Her identity as an African American woman had provided her with the insights and language to do more than just speak on racial matters. Her own identity served in optimizing the ability to see language more deeply through the lens of American society and history. With the moment fully in her possession to speak and reflect on the power of her work, Morrison chooses to use her lecture as an opportunity to tell a story. The use of this narrative would function as an allegory for matters far greater than celebrating a successful and decorated literary career. Through her prose and imagery, Morrison speaks her own prophetic warnings to those present and to future generations of writers.

The story that Morrison shares with her guests is simple in its premise: an old blind and wise woman is visited by a group of young people who want to test her power and wisdom by asking her if the bird that one of them is holding in their hand is dead or alive. Morrison primes the allegory by using the bird and the old woman as metaphors for language and a writer, respectively. She proceeds to explore the possible intentions and purposes of the question asked by the group of youths. If language is dead or alive in one's hand, are we responsible for either? The blind woman explores the depth of these intentions as Morrison warns of the manufactured use of language that has been historically prevalent: "The systematic looting of language can be

recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, midwifery properties, replacing them with menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” 320). Morrison expresses through the blind woman the wisdom gained through the experience drawn from recorded history, as the warning continues to point to the various platforms in which language has been and continues to be abused and manipulated: “Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity-driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered, and exposed” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” 320). The dynamic of the story reveals its mission of advocating for and defending the responsibility of language and the power behind its use. In echoing Morrison’s prophesy, today’s current use of social media for the purposes of consumerism, nationalism, and fear mongering have exploded over the last decade since its invention. In the U.S., the result of such irresponsible use of language through this high-speed technology has been a growing tense political climate since 2012. The culmination of this exploitation of language reached uncontrollable heights during the presidential election of Donald Trump, which led to the inception of fake news accusations, contradicting claims, and vicious oppositional ideologies competing for consumption. In a research article conducted by The Institute for National Security Studies, the recent addition of the word Post-Truth to the Oxford Dictionary is recognized as a significant moment in the evolution of language, and within that recognition lies the danger Morrison warns about:

Only in 2016, against the backdrop of the United States presidential elections and the United Kingdom referendum about withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), did the new and rather obscure term (Post-Truth) become prevalent, and its use in the political context skyrocketed by thousands of percentage points. It was for this reason that Oxford Dictionaries selected it as the “Word of the Year” in 2016 and defined it as “a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” (Brahms, *Philosophy of Post-Truth*, 1)

As the world becomes more interconnected through technology and the Internet, the ability to spread massive amounts of information at the speed of light creates an extreme vulnerability for the abuse of language. This moral responsibility of the writer—as the blind woman represents in her age and wisdom—is the rallying call Morrison has been advocating for through her work and her critical analysis of literature.

Many times in her literary criticisms, Morrison has explained her intentional practice of reading as a writer and not as a reader. Her ability to observe the use of language is how she forms the old wise and blind woman as a reflection of herself. When explaining in her Nobel lecture the importance of language to the blind woman, Morrison is revealing her own fears and views connected to the use of words when she states: “She is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes. Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences” (Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” 319). Morrison’s prophetic vision speaks through the fears of the old woman as the historical tensions of the past in the U.S. have been riled up by the dangerous

combination of language and technology in the hands of irresponsible users. Ideologies have spread faster and political divisions have created separatist tendencies within the country that have led to acts of domestic terrorism and violence. Social media has become the new town square for ideologues to fan the flames of extremism. The old woman's wisdom recounts the past misuse and warns of its return: "There is and will be rousing language to keep citizens armed and arming; slaughtered and slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms, and boulevards; stirring, memorializing language to mask the pity and waste of needless death. There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," 320). Whether the old woman or Morrison herself holds on to the hope that their warning could stop the rise in dangerous language and its irresponsible use, one can recognize shades of the Hegelian historical cycle of civilizations with the period of decay presenting itself through the spoiling of language as evidence. For the generation experiencing the stage of decay for their home, country, or nation, the warning and the spoiled fruit become their prophetic burden to bear.

Morrison's artistic talent is on full display during her lecture. The ability to convey the warning and fears of a wise generation is executed with the fullness that her novels contain. She uses the same fullness to elevate the voices of the young people visiting the blind woman to represent the desire to understand their world and its complexities; they embody the generational line of questioning that comes with every historical cycle of struggle: "Our inheritance is an affront. You want us to have your old, blank eyes and see only cruelty and mediocrity. Do you think we are stupid enough to perjure ourselves again and again with the fiction of nationhood? How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past" (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," 323). The exchange ends with both youth and wisdom recognizing one another

and their shared dilemma. They recognize the world they inhabit and the ills that plague them both the same. The role of education enters the consciousness of the allegory as the youth are asking for a teacher. They are asking for accountability and collaboration. They seek to heed the warning of the blind woman by asserting themselves as conscious to the decay that is spreading around them. The story Morrison delivers during her highest achievement becomes the call to consciousness for those present in her honor, and those who will hear her words in the generations to come.

Since her Nobel Prize celebration, Morrison has published five more novels, seven children's books, a book of poems, a play, a short story, and several non-fiction works. With her passing in 2019, she was also able to witness her prophecy fully realized in political and consumerist discourse. Through the use of social media, the irresponsible use of language has become highly monetized for the purpose of political power and financial gain. The high-speed exchange of information—whether intentionally false or not—has saturated the social consciousness with slogans, hashtags, and manufactured consent. For the writers of this generation tasked with passing on the responsibility of language, Morrison's career, works, and Nobel lecture have given them the blueprint for unraveling the truth and power behind words. The practice to read as a writer and not a reader must become an act of second nature, which creates a line of defense for future generations to have an opportunity to defend that line themselves when it is their turn to inherit the duty. For those young writers who seek to answer the same questions that were presented to the blind, old, and wise woman, Morrison responds to their recognition of both duty and hope with an affirmation of unity in the struggle for truth, taking flight together.

"I trust you now.

I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it.

Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done-together."

(Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," 323)

CHAPTER 5

ON BUTLER

5.i BUTLER'S *PARABLES*

The human imagination has envisioned many of the social and technological advancements of the past century before their occurrence. Whether intentional or not, many writers have predicted within their works an assortment of futures that hold both optimistic and terrifying possibilities for human trends. As the world became more industrialized and interconnected between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the production of more imaginative and speculative fiction began to grow. This trend in literature would lead to the establishing of the Science Fiction (SF) literary genre in the 1920s. The cultural influences for both the production and interest in SF were driven by the fast growth of industrialization across the world, the invention of the atomic bomb, and the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik into space. These events would begin to shape the fears and anxieties of society and become the most influential elements for SF writers moving forward. Literary visions of the future once were driven by the sights of Utopia—with a specific emphasis on a functioning perfect society—but in the wake of World War II and the rise of the Cold War, SF began to produce literary visions of the inevitable decay of Euro-colonial civilization. The skillset for speculation in the literary arts began to emerge as a prophetic medium through which future society can shape their decisions and avoid catastrophe. This interest for dystopian narratives have added to the formation of the literary genre of Speculative Fiction, which functions as an umbrella-term for horror, fantasy, and supernatural literature as well. Since SF began to capture the minds of readers everywhere a century ago, writers have been sharing their literary predictions of society, whether they are based on science, history, or radical imagination.

In the past century, one of the most explored themes of speculative fiction has been the dystopian world, with a focus on its historical roots and its human lessons. The literary tradition of dystopian novels in the early period of speculative fiction has often centered itself around the themes of surveillance, censorship, technological advancement, and anarchy. The protagonist—who often has been male—is faced with the discovery of and/or confrontation with an oppressive entity that usually takes the form of a government or rigid social order of class hierarchy. Since the 1930s, writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury, and Anthony Burgess have all imagined culturally impactful dystopian stories that have jumped out from the pages of their novels on to the screens of television and cinema. Since the year 2000, science fiction and speculative fiction novels with dystopian narratives have grown in both production and popularity, especially in the young adult genre. An example of this growth in interest is reflected in the mainstream success of the *Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* book series. Both franchises have enjoyed commercial success and also have been made into movie franchises with huge box office gains. In analyzing this growth of interest in dystopian narratives by young adults, Melissa Ames argues that: “the post-9/11 climate has contributed to the popularity of these YA (Young Adult) dystopias as they present fictional fear-based scenarios that align with contemporary cultural concerns” (Ames, “Engaging ‘Apolitical’ Adolescents,” 4). Ames considers this post-9/11 and dystopian interest as a major influence and motivator for the growth of recent social justice organizing in the young adult and youth population. The recent successful young adult dystopian franchises have been centered on the heroic efforts of a young protagonist defending his/her community against oppressive authorities. This perhaps reflects the influential narratives centered on acts of heroism in a dystopian world for many growing activists and organizers coping with the realities of the post-9/11 era.

In connecting the generational trauma caused by the politics of fear employed since the U.S. launch of the War on Terror and the state of economic collapse from the 2008 Recession, Ames formulates that: “Through their mediation of fictionalized scenarios, they (Dystopian Narratives) present trauma in order to do away with it, hence becoming a sort of emotional security blanket for individuals existing in an unstable post-9/11 world” (Ames, “Engaging ‘Apolitical’ Adolescents,” 7). The growth of social media and internet technology have opened up the spaces and increased the speed in which these modern day consequences of political negligence can be paired with the increase of dystopian narratives available in all forms of media beyond literature. This mainstream success has been helpful in discovering how writers and readers from around the world have begun to identify with and imagine future dystopias both in similar and different fashions. With the growing success of the dystopian narrative and the rise of more diverse voices in literature, there has been an emergence of writers who have produced more socially and politically complex dystopian narratives that have pushed the conversation of how close the world is to fulfilling some of the more frightening predictions of the dystopian imagination. For many of these writers who have broken the mold of the traditional American canon, the use of a radical imagination—imagination that challenges socially historical tropes and hierarchies—has been the key to disrupting the narrow narratives of the literary visions of the future.

The power of radical imagination has enabled writers in the post-modern era to envision bold new worlds and futures that find alternative ways of challenging many of the social and psychological themes in the literary canon. The direction and purpose of radical imagination is to find original narratives that twist traditional stories and themes, and as a result discover complex perspectives. These perspectives help carry old lessons of the human condition further out to

greater frontiers than before. In this growing practice of radical thought, the genre of speculative fiction has emerged as a leading force for the new narratives that inspire deep reflections on the movements of society and its inevitable destiny. In the novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, SF writer Octavia E. Butler envisions a dystopian future where an African American woman leads a growing community towards survival, and as a result Butler provides both a prophetic warning and plan of action for the generations to come.

The first of the *Parables* is set in the not so distant future. Butler introduces Lauren Olamina in the year 2024. Olamina is a fifteen-year-old girl who lives with her father, stepmother, and four younger half-brothers in the California town of Robledo. The state of the country is that of an economically depressed nation that had been descending into chaos and despair since the early 2000s. Olamina and her family live in a walled-in community with several dozens of other families, and the pace of life is one of uncertainty as food and employment are becoming more and more scarce. The community sustains itself through neighborhood gardening and sharing with one another. The threat of outside mobs of desperate and violent people will eventually break through the wall in 2027, and burn down the neighborhood. This event sends an eighteen-year-old Olamina with two other survivors, who all have lost their families to the mob violence, on a quest to find safety.

The long and dangerous journey ends in the first *Parable* after the group of three survivors grows to thirteen, in which one of the new members named Bankole—who will become Olamina's lover—will provide the group with a large and isolated property in northern California for a safe new start. Olamina along the way becomes the leader of the group by preaching her vision of a new spiritual practice she calls Earthseed. The end of *Sower* sets the group of survivors on the journey of establishing a community called Acorn on Bankole's land,

and with the survivors' hope of beginning a new life of purpose and prosperity. The events that unfold in *Parable of the Talents* will upend those hopes and force Olamina to find new ways to practice her Earthseed beliefs in a chaotic world, which is only becoming increasingly more hostile for people such as herself. Within those sources of hostility and violence lays the familiar culprits of social and political ideologies that function as both historical recognition and prophetic awareness for Butler's *Parables*.

Part of the power of Butler's social criticism was her ability to write prophetically as she constructed the fictional ultra-conservative political movement of Christian America, a group led by presidential candidate Andrew Steele Jarret, whose theological rhetoric incites violence and proclaims its movement as the salvation of the collapsed country. As an example of one of the more shocking modern accuracies, in the *Talents* Butler predicts recent political events eighteen years early when writing Jarret's rhetoric on violence: "As for the beatings, the tarring and feathering, and the destruction of 'heathen houses of devil-worship,' he has a simple answer: 'Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and becomes one of us. Help us to make America great again'" (Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 15). Butler would pass away in 2006, ten years before the world would see part of her dystopian vision ring eerily similar in the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump. This prophetic connection serves as evidence that Butler's work in speculative fiction has been successful in further expanding the range of social and political issues that can be addressed in dystopian narratives.

The recent posthumous emergence and success of Butler's *Parables* have both captured the imagination of readers around the world; with *Sower* reaching the New York Times bestsellers list twenty-three years after its release. Butler's achievement was a prophetic

prediction of where the U.S. and the rest of the world may be headed if conditions do not change.

In an interview while speaking on the *Parables*, Butler reveals:

It is to look at where we are now, what we are doing now, and to consider where some of our current behaviors and unattended problems might take us. I considered drugs and the effects of drugs on the children of drug addicts. I looked at the growing rich/poor gap, at throwaway labor, at our willingness to build and fill prisons, our reluctance to build and repair schools and libraries, and at our assault on the environment. In particular, I looked at global warming and the ways in which it's likely to change things for us. (Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 337)

Butler presents and addresses a wider scope of social and political issues that expand further outside of the limitations of the gender-specific narratives of writers such as Leni Zumas (*Red Clocks*) and Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), or the monolithic theme of a (Anglo) man versus a high-tech surveillance state. Butler's *Parables* breaks away from the early dystopian model and tells the story of a young African American teen who is coming of age in a chaotic U.S. where climate change and economic collapse have left the people beneath the wealthy class vulnerable to instability, ideological extremism, and violence.

By facing the dangerously decaying conditions of the country, Olamina pushes through an environment that is designed to exploit her body and threaten her safety. This area of the literary imagination is where Butler is able to speak to a depth of consciousness amplified by her identity as an African American woman. Professors De Witt Douglas Kilgore and Ranu Samantrai explain this intersection of identity and the literary imagination in a 2010 article celebrating Butler's career by stating:

For Butler, the most intimate fear is located at the meeting point of race and sex, the former the license for and the latter the tool by which a historically enfranchised class has controlled the bodies and destinies of peoples considered inferior. If humanity as a whole is subject to the fear of bodily violation and exploitation, in Butler's futures it is black women who have the longest familiarity with it. Such unfortunate experts know the best strategies for survival. (Kilgore, "A Memorial to Octavia E. Butler," 355)

This intersection of identity and the literary imagination enabled Butler throughout her career to challenge the social norms and structures that dictated the role for the individual in society. The quests of Butler's characters function from outside of the margins of society and provide a new narrative of possibilities with the rise of action and resolutions that drive her abilities for speculation. Kilgore and Samantrai emphasize this ability when recognizing: "And repeatedly in her novels... she questions the convention that enfranchised leaders and majorities always shape the nature and fate of communities. Instead, her focus is on "minority" characters whose distance from centers of power increases their potential for reconfiguring their social and political worlds" (Kilgore, "A Memorial to Octavia E. Butler," 356). Throughout the *Parables*, Butler builds on a sense of collaboration amongst diverse identities that highlights the need for a common sense of solidarity among all people. Throughout the dystopian canon, there has been a consistent presence of a state of inequality between the classes of haves and the have-nots—whether the dystopian vision contains the existence of wealth in the traditional sense or instead a hoarding of valuable resources such as water—this common narrative of the historical power struggle in certain hierarchical societies has maintained a class consciousness for readers of SF and speculative fiction to digest over the last century.

This thematic use of social unity in the face of violent oppression is what continues to connect with readers of dystopian novels today. Without class solidarity, individuals will operate for their own self-interest, and as a result the power dynamics are heavily favored for those in the wealthy and corporate class to oppress the vulnerable lower class. These conditions create a guns for hire dynamic that evolves into a dangerous state of activity in a high-tech militarized society. In analyzing the socio-historical causes and effects of the dystopian future, Jim Miller highlights: “with the death of the reformist visions of cities has come the death of the democratic ideal of public space. No longer do American cities belong to utopian wanderers like Walt Whitman or reformist planners like Charles Olmsted. Postmodern American cities are high-security-theme-park-prisons” (Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping,” 348). The lens for examining a critical dystopia, as Miller explains by drawing from the work of Butler in his article “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision,” allows one to identify the warning signs of the incoming state of high-tech feudalism in America. The optimism of the twentieth century for a progressive society for all people becomes shattered as the country collapses, falling from the highs of occupying the position of world economic leader, down to the status of a wasteland for raiders and enslavers to plunder. The best response to these conditions is the organizing of communities for the benefit of mutual co-existence and prosperity. This lesson of community building and collaboration has since left the pages of Butler’s work and begun to take shape in the efforts of writers, activists, and organizers across the country in response to the growing signs of Butler’s prophetic dystopian vision becoming reality.

5.ii THE ROOTS FOR *EARTHSEED*

As the U.S. reaches the year 2024—the year Butler introduces Olamina and her dystopian setting—the recent social and political trends seem to have been racing towards a prophetic sense of fulfillment. The growing social instability in the face of the rise of political extremism has been triggered once again by the mobilization of the African American community and other marginalized communities against injustice and inequality. The moment cell phones gained the capability to operate its social media applications wherever its users go, and spread information in an instant to the rest of the interconnected world by the late 2010s, the social media age began to mold all aspects of life to fit around its powerful capabilities. Marketing and sales efforts evolved into social media campaigns that track users' Internet searches for a more accurate effort for potential sales, and the life of individual people on social media has become an opportunity for achieving a viral celebrity status. For activists and organizers responding to the killings of unarmed African American men, women, and children, social media became the revolutionary technological advancement that can be used as a potent tool for protesting and resisting oppression. The new moment has arrived in the present with a high-charged milieu of historic proportions for writers and creatives to respond to by creating literary and artistic works that speak to the time of social decay, and envision a path to a better future.

In the tradition of the historical African American struggle for equality or the Black Liberation Movement, the Movement for Black Lives is the present generational effort that follows the long history of resistance that has existed through the early Abolitionist movement, the anti-lynching campaigns, and the Civil Rights Movement. Much like the Civil Rights Movement's early spread mass awareness due to the technological advancement of the television—which exposed the violent images of oppression through out the country—the

Movement for Black Lives has benefited from the massive reach of social media to expose the violent and oppressive conditions afflicting the African American community, often capturing the violent deaths of its community members by the police. Since Trayvon Martin's death in 2012, the accumulation of cases has motivated a continuous effort by activists to utilize social media to connect, organize, and execute campaigns of protests and resistance against the systemic oppression of African American and other marginalized communities. For activists and writers Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (a.m. brown), the works of Butler provide the vision for how to prepare for the oppressive institutions and the possible dystopian future ahead.

In working together, Imarisha and a.m. brown curated an anthology of SF stories that centers movements for liberation titled *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements*. For Imarisha, the work activists engage in requires a potent imagination for the formation of new possibilities for communities that have not known a safe and equitable society. In explaining their anthology project Imarisha writes: "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds" (Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 3). By linking together the imaginative work performed by activists with the SF and speculative genres, Imarisha pushes further and identifies a more tailored genre for the work writers like her engage in. In carving out a new literary identity based on the influential work of Butler, Imarisha asserts:

"Visionary fiction" is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of

science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power.

Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending towards justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born.

Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. (Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 4)

The use of a radical imagination that challenges the historical tropes of both the literary and social landscape becomes the guiding practice to liberate the mind of oppressed people everywhere in search of a new world and safer future. The generational response to the new moment in American history has presented itself in the activism of individuals who have rooted themselves in the work of Butler. As writers begin to carve out their unique identities and stories for the future, many activists such as a.m. brown have looked to Olamina's Earthseed practice to prepare and build the communities of tomorrow.

The social justice organizing work of the present day has evolved from the reactionary responses to the killings of African Americans, to long-term political campaigns plans, and the rise of mutual aid efforts in the face of rising climate related disasters and infrastructure failures. All of these attempts for liberation organizing require a sense of community building and connectivity. For a.m. brown, recognizing the need for a community practice that can both stimulate the radical imagination of all marginalized people and also prepare for the possibility of a dystopian future has led her to publishing *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, a self-help book heavily inspired by the Earthseed teaching of Butler's *Parables*. In explaining the connection between the concept of emergence—the activity of complex systems

emerging from unique and critical interactions and connections—and the formation of strategies, a.m. brown clarifies: “Emergent strategies are ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions. This juxtaposition of emergence and strategy was what made the most sense to me when I was trying to explain the kind of leadership I see in Octavia’s books” (Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 20). Navigating through the process of working on individual understanding, along with communal collaboration, and adaptability in the face of new challenges, a.m. brown molds the Earthseed ideology for change into an activist motto for perseverance. The very first words of *Sower* begins with the opening epigraph from Olamina’s journal entry: “All that you touch/You Change/All that you Change/Changes you/The only lasting truth/Is Change/God/Is Change” (Butler, *Sower* 3). Functioning as the Amen response to the ups and downs of life, “God is Change” is the nucleus of the Earthseed movement. For a.m. brown, the philosophy of adapting to the life changing events in the face of a dystopian future is fully rooted in the writings of Butler’s Earthseed spiritual practice.

As the current movement for social justice has become more visibly led by African American women, LGBTQIA+ community members, and other marginalized people, the radical imagination of Butler’s *Parables* provides the foundation for envisioning future radical possibilities. This need for the radical imagination is emphasized by a.m. brown when noting the dangers of the traditional mainstream narrative of American identity: “Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable” (Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 18). This recognition of the power of imagination speaks to why the work of Butler has challenged these identity tropes and misrepresentations since her early novels in the 1970s. The

recognition of oneself in Butler's work is what inspired a.m. brown to see herself fully in the position of organizing resistance. This recognition is expressed with: "Octavia wrote novels with young Black women protagonists meeting aliens, surviving apocalypse, evolving into vampires, becoming telepathic networks, time traveling to reckon with slave-owning ancestors. Woven throughout her work are two things: 1) a coherent visionary exploration of humanity and 2) emergent strategies for being better humans" (Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 17). The seed was planted in people like a.m. brown who read the works of Butler's radical imagination and as a result decided to employ her prophetic vision, and use it as call to organize around a better future for all people experiencing the dystopian decay of modern society. Like all prophecies that are heard, the duty of the young generation that will inherit the world is the mission of responding to the urgency of the time.

Octavia E. Butler's dystopian future in the *Parables* is not too outlandish a reality for today's readers. The effects of climate change and political instability are part of what makes our lived experience reflect the initial conditions of Lauren Olamina's life. The current state of the country has inspired many diverse voices to speak out against oppressive conditions. Many of the leading voices are those of African American women from diverse families such as Olamina's. The need to cope with the psychological traumas of the violence and economic instability has led many people to find purpose and salvation in all forms of religious and spiritual practice. Some may be new ideologies or mere reinterpretations of old doctrines. The growth of these religious practices often leads to the increase of wealth, power, and influence. In the wrong hands, these can become the roots of future institutions of oppression that seem to mimic the historical past of colonization in a supposed post-colonial world. The lessons of Butler's *Earthseed* are those of a practice of class solidarity, empathy, and adaptability to change

for the sake of human survival and prosperity. For the young generation that is currently experiencing their coming of age under similar conditions as when a fifteen-year-old Olamina came of age, the hope is that Butler's *Parables* can provide a guiding light into a radical future that one day can take root among the stars.

“Writers use everything.

We can't help it.

Whatever touches us touches our writing.”

(Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 341)

CHAPTER 6

THE AMERICAN PROPHECY

In the midst of a global pandemic that has forced the world to seek safety through quarantines, masks, and a heightened sense of hygiene; the United States observed its 2020 presidential election cycle. After four days of counting all the votes in the historic turnout, the results declared former Vice-President Joe Biden as the winner. With procedural stages of confirmation still ahead, the accusations of a stolen election made by outgoing President Donald Trump would fan the flames of political division. This fracture between the parties had been turning more volatile and dangerous in its rhetoric over the previous twelve years since the election of the country's first African American President in 2008. With the power of social media, the oppositional forces that reject the results of the election would organize a rally to reclaim the country they affirm as theirs. On January 6th 2021, with the presidential inauguration only two weeks away, President Trump and other Republican hardliners would speak at a massive rally in the nation's capital. By the early afternoon, the Capitol building was stormed by thousands of the rally's attendees while Congress was in session. Images of Congressional officials seeking shelter and safety while men and women paraded the Confederate flag through the halls of Congress spread all through the news networks and social media. This moment in American history had never occurred before. Yet this moment was not a surprise to many observing the trajectory of the U.S. since before the election of President Barack Obama. Whether analyzing through the Hegelian historical cycles or the prophetic writings of Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler, this moment had been foreseen and has arrived.

In the wake of the January 6th storming of the Capitol, the intelligence and national security institutions have begun to center their efforts towards the rise of social media

organizing. This response to the dangerous rhetoric and acts of right-wing extremists is being tailored to fit all ideological opposition to the governing state. Social media companies have begun to de-platform user accounts that express right-wing extremist views, but also many leftist and social justice user accounts have been targeted, as well. The social media power of the country's Black Liberation Movement has begun to experience blanket censorship as a result of the government's newfound concern for the threat of domestic terrorism. As with the response to the 9/11 attacks twenty years ago, the proposal of a new and revised Patriot Act—with an increased emphasis on data collection and Internet surveillance—has been set forth as a consequence of the storming of the Capitol. The monitoring of speech has now become a dangerous fine line to walk in the face of the most socially and politically tense era in American history since the days of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The path to this alarming state of an endangered first amendment right to speak was paved by the technological advancement of social media and its unregulated consumer based capabilities.

The power of language relies on a medium in which it may thrive and spread to as many individuals as possible. The invention of the printing press, the advancement of communication through the radio and telephone, and the cultural revolution of television broadcasting have all maximized the power of language as readers and listeners were transformed into consumers by a capitalist society. Language, as Morrison emphasized throughout her career, can be a vessel to liberate minds or trap them into dangerous ideological trances. The intentions of those who monitor or manufacture language become clear when observing their efforts for censorship and mass manipulation. The impact social media has had on the world is immediate. Once the ability to instantly broadcast oneself to the world through a cell phone became a reality by 2010, social movements for democracy spread across the Middle East and North Africa in what became

known as Arab Spring. This would be the infancy of social media organizing for social justice and democracy. Three years later the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter went viral after the not-guilty verdict of George Zimmerman in the case of the murder of Trayvon Martin, and since then the organizing power of African American and other non-Anglo communities in the U.S. has only increased in influence. During the 2016 presidential election, the social media-based movement was still finding its full potential and identity as it began to force a tense confrontation between the failed history of race relations in America and the electoral aims of both political parties beginning to adapt to the capabilities of social media.

When observing the current moment and milieu—eight years after the start of the Movement for Black Lives and the rise of social media organizing—there is no denying that the social and political landscape has been fully transformed by the power of social media. The presidential campaigns for both Biden and Trump employed messaging and mobilizing tactics that mimicked the efforts of social justice organizers who had been learning how to channel the full capabilities of the revolutionary technological advancement of a generation. The manipulation of these tactics has resulted in the co-opting of its liberationist identity and now has become a tool for propaganda and misinformation. Social media's infinite reach and capacity for conflicting narratives, conspiracies, and facts has flooded the social consciousness and as a result, the accusations of fake news have entrenched political divisions even further. The goals of the Black Liberation Movement that had been echoed throughout American history now stands before its next challenge of censorship and increased military response to social unrest. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police in 2020 sparked a new wave of mass protests and unrest during the global pandemic of Covid-19. The responses to these protestors have been sharply different than the responses to right-wing armed protests including the siege of

the Capitol on January 6th. Mirroring the years leading to the Civil War, as well as the years leading to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, this current moment has been constructed by the same oppositional forces and narratives that has plagued the nation since its founding. Today's American writers have the opportunity to speak to the moment as Baldwin dared to do when confronted with the duty and burden to do so. In order to execute this literary task, writers must look to the work of the past to address their present condition and envision the future that had been hoped for, century after century.

CHAPTER 7

THE PROPHETIC IDENTITY

American identity has in many ways embodied the plateau of Euro-colonial civilization. Its roots in white supremacy are intertwined with the historical weaponizing of Christianity. The mainstream consciousness of the U.S. has been centered on the morality of Christian theology, but it has consistently resisted the recognition of its diverse population and true history of human rights violations, African enslavement, and Native American genocide. The prophets and prophecies of the Bible have provided a space for advocates for equality to speak to their present time in hopes of connect Scriptures to reality. The recognition of a prophet is achieved after the moment to act has passed. The function of prophecy has historically been to warn against impending struggle or catastrophe. It is also a social justice practice that connects the universal struggle against oppression as evidenced by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the early abolitionist efforts of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Baldwin himself, once a child pastor, employed language rooted in Christian theology throughout his liberationist non-fiction work. Professor George Shulman explores these relational dynamics between prophets and society when stating:

Prophecy is a changeable and contested social practice. After all, there was profound conflict between those (call them "house prophets") who worked for the royal house of Israel and voiced god's unconditional support for it and those canonized now as "the" prophets, whose god condemns idolatry and holds both monarchy and nation to account. People revise the practice of prophecy, and argue about whose and which words to endow with (or recognize as having) authority. (Shulman, "Thinking Authority Democratically," 712-713)

When considering the self-promoted image of the U.S. as a Christian nation, one can argue that Baldwin's ability to employ language that utilizes Christian doctrine to appeal to the morality of the nation's Anglo citizens increases his effectiveness to make the prophetic argument for self-evaluation and the urgency to act. In *The Fire Next Time*—a title that itself is taken from an African American Christian spiritual—Baldwin emphasizes the urgency of the moment with the hope of breaking through and helping to steer the nation's conscience towards justice and equality. Shulman contrasts Baldwin's urgency with the biblical echoes of scripture when analyzing:

We can feel the aggression in Jeremiah's or Baldwin's voice, tied to indignation—at injustice and denial of it, at idolatry and attachment to it, at repetition and blindness to it. The aggressive assertion about how it is with us—about how we *must* see our situation and history *if* we are to bring our selves out of it—sounds like a "thou shalt," even though it is a conditional claim in an imperative voice. For such claims seem to deny that we can credibly argue back let alone compromise: firmly persuaded about the conditions they state, prophets seem relentless, and in their frustrated rage at us, punitive in their insistence that we will suffer because we refuse to face (the true meaning of) our situation.

(Shulman, "Thinking Authority Democratically," 726)

For Baldwin's attempts to shake the conscience of the nation, the result of his mission—to not only witness the moment, but to speak directly to it—is a social detachment from the prophetic warning signs as media and politics change the topic of conversation, tuning out the urgency of the historical moment that was the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The mainstream narrative is manufactured to lionize Rev. King Jr. as an American hero, demonize the Black

Panther Party and the Black Power Movement esthetics, and begin the militarization of police departments across the country. During his final years of life, Baldwin witnessed the nation elect former actor Ronald Reagan as president. As governor of California, Reagan had led the efforts to silence the Black Panther Party, which would result in targeted killings of its leaders and the political imprisonment of those who survived attempts on their lives. When visiting the site of Baldwin's home in Paris—after it had just been demolished for a new housing development—Professor Eddie S. Glaude reflects on this period of America as it entered the 1980s when stating: “The ruins were a fitting description for what Baldwin saw in the latter part of his life in the United States. He saw decay and wreckage alongside greed and selfishness” (Glaude, *Begin Again*, xvii). Today, Baldwin's words decorate many of the social media posts, protest signs, and speeches that have emerged during the present effort for justice and equality for African Americans. The fulfillment of prophecy has elevated Baldwin as one of America's greatest thinkers and writers. In considering his hopes and aspirations for a better future, there are still those who continue in his legacy to prophesize for the recognition of a decaying American dream.

If Baldwin's work functions as a direct confrontation against the manufactured historical narrative and identity of America—with the purpose of contrasting his prophetic method—then Morrison and Butler stand alongside Baldwin as a functioning effort to rearrange the American historical timeline. If Baldwin writes to his present moment, then Morrison's career is a collection of works that write through the past, and Butler's career in this instance is a clear effort to write towards the future. Baldwin's moment and audience exist in a heavily Anglo-male and Christian-dominated America. During Morrison and Butler's careers, the country had begun to shift in its identity as media spaces began to provide more opportunities for diverse voices and

images. The cases of Morrison and Butler stand as examples of works of literature that carve out those spaces for future diverse voices, in the American literary canon and the Science Fiction genres respectively. The prophetic capabilities of both Morrison and Butler benefit from the expansion of identities and the escape from the theological confines of Christianity. Their radical imagination allow for them to create narratives that speaks truly to human conditions in the realities of Euro-colonial society. Professor M. Cooper Harriss explores this greater reach of freedom for prophetic literature by both Morrison and Butler when analyzing:

At the same time, Morrison and Butler represent exemplars of a post-Christian (and thus a postbiblical-theological) America that contends with inescapable biblical echoes and legacies (for good and ill) while simultaneously striving to reimagine its certain textual futures that respond to and move beyond these legacies and their innovations. Morrison recasts this biblical mode by looking backwards and renovating the terms of its contribution to American literary expression. Butler looks ahead, innovating not only the meaning of the Bible but its canonical possibilities for the future tense. (Harriss, “The Bible in American Literature,” 100)

The collective works of Morrison reach as far back as the nineteenth century and move through the twentieth century, exploring the nuances and conditions of its different decades. Along the way, Morrison is successful in unearthing untold stories of African American people in the U.S. who form so much of its foundation, creating a need to reassess its identity and deconstruct the manufactured narrative of American exceptionalism. Her work stands as an example for the practice of conscience in literary imagination that does not erase, misrepresent, or demonize any other identity, avoiding the marginalization of any racial or social group. Butler’s work absorbs

the milieu of her lifetime and combines it with the explosion of the information age that expands the capabilities of data collection. This mixture facilitates Butler's imagination to envision a future U.S. and world that if heedless to the warning signs of social unrest, political instability, and climate science, will find a dystopian future to be unavoidable. Without the contributions by Baldwin and Morrison to the conversation on race relations and racialized language in America, then Butler could not have written as freely without the limitations of identity politics. This freedom facilitates Butler's imagination contributing to the SF genre and the growth of Afrofuturism, which had begun to form in the 1990s as more African American writers published diverse visions of Speculative Fiction. Her visions of the future include diverse identities and as a result, activists and organizers of all backgrounds today see themselves through her prophetic imagination. As the works of Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler continue to endure through the test of time, both the sense of urgency and the recognition of prophetic warnings become the responsibility of the American reader and writer to contend with during this moment of American decay and collapse. As analysts, pundits, and politicians seek answers in order to respond to this moment, the works of American writers continue to hold many of the imagined possibilities of the future that can save the country.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The determining factor for the successful application of Taine's formula has been the prophetic element—the writer—responding to the moment, interacting with the milieu of its society or civilization. In revisiting Taine's idea to quantify literary works into a functioning scientific formula for the successful prediction of future trends and civilizations, one must consider the material available for the formula to be executed correctly. The inception of the race-milieu-moment elements meets its limit during Taine's lifetime, with scholars and analysts not yet having discovered the need for an additional element to deploy a functioning practice for prophetic predictions. The human element of the writer cannot be overstated for this formula to be successful. It is the writer who lives the shared experiences of the society they inhabit. The sense of identity of the writer depends on the systemic beliefs of their homeland regarding race, ethnicity, and faith. These systemic beliefs shape the social conditions, the political environment, and the power dynamics that exist between the social classes of people. The tension of the social climate is influenced by how these sub-elements interact with and react to one another. As civilization advances its development of documentation and record keeping, the history of a people, race, and nation begin constructing narratives for identity and society. The development of these historical narratives finds its supporters who see themselves in these accounts. They also expose its victims and resisters within the margins of its neglectful storylines. This has led to moments in which the morality of a nation is confronted and the threat of a collapse looms larger as the balance between social classes becomes overburdened by greed, selfishness, and hatred.

Taine did not live long enough to witness the possibilities for massive data collection and historical documentation that was created by the information age. For future writers who

critically analyze their society through works of fiction and non-fiction, the opportunity to absorb infinite amounts of historical data and philosophical works has become the most invaluable development for prophetic writing. The success of Taine's formula had always been the eventual passage of time and technological advancement for writers to develop a sharper literary lens for predicting future trends and civilizations. When applying the formula to American society, the works of Baldwin, Morrison, and Butler reflect the fruits of decades of research and investigation of the past and the present works of human history. The present condition and milieu of America today is confronted by the prophetic visions of Baldwin's warning against failing to act in the moment, or Morrison's plea to protect language and to be fully responsible with its power. In case these go unheard, then Butler's dystopian future of climate disaster and social collapse may become fully realized. For some, the signs of those dystopian conditions have begun to form clearly enough to mobilize to save the nation from such a dark fate. In the resulting analysis of these three American writers' works, one can see how the social, cultural, and intellectual trends of today's social justice movement are fully rooted in their prophetic words. The power of language remains at the root of civilization. The role of its artists, writers, and creators becomes increasingly recognized as the ongoing mission to learn the past, observe the present, and envision a better future.

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