



BOOK REVIEW:

*Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and
Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*

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Jones, Cassandra L. *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*. Ohio. Ohio State UP 2024.

In the introduction to her volume, *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*, Cassandra L. Jones highlights the discursive essence of black women's literature, what she calls the discursive nature (2) of Black women's literary tradition. According to Jones, this communal exchange aims to "have a clear stake in imagining, presenting, and creating liberated futures" to collaboratively preserve cultural practices (1). Her interrogation of this rescuing of the past as a compulsory step needed to enable the possibility of imagining the future echoes the claim Toni Morrison made in her 1984 essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that a community's connection to ancestral ways of knowing is essential for its future survival. Following this parameter, Jones emphasizes how the collective protection of the past is a feminist enterprise that is essential for her definition of "Black speculative feminism," a term that encapsulates black women's literary dwellings, that is, spaces that enable creativity, potential and detached examination. As Jones argues, to design possible futures, black speculative fiction needs this activity of recovering the history that was interrupted by colonialism and slavery, so that it can create an approach that supports an African-based sense of time where past, present and future happen simultaneously. These elements facilitate the restorative aspect of how Jones's "Black speculative feminism" aims to imagine liberated black futures.

In chapter one, Jones discusses examples of how reconnecting with the past through memory leads to healing. In her comparative analysis of Tananarive Due's *The Good House* and Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's*

Arms, she employs the notion of *rememory* to further examine how Black women's speculative fiction as a visionary genre "offers an unusual means of annotating those material histories where Black emotional and intellectual interiority are redacted" (3). Jones focuses on how these two novels present a perspective that departs from an African-based spiritual and cultural standpoint, contrary to white horror narratives that ignore black history and trauma. Epistemologically this cultural standpoint serves to illustrate how the real danger, in terms of individual identity, for the population of Africa lies in disregarding their historical trauma. The protagonists of the two novels struggle every day because of their split from their ancestral roots, which deeply affects their identities and sense of community. Jones's examination of *rememory* firstly addresses Toni Morrison's interpretation of it as "an intrusive thought" in *Beloved* (43) where this invasive mnemonic experience happens in relationship to a location. Similarly, Due's novel employs a place, the good house, to represent the protagonist's forgotten cultural legacy and to examine how individual and communal history change once her connection to it is reestablished. According to Jones, such rejoining surpasses healing from trauma and leads to joy, which, in turn, becomes a central means by which Black women express memory through the speculative. In contrast to these discussions, Jones's examination of Nalo Hopkinson's novel adds a further physical dimension, that of the human body, into the study of memory and trauma. Thus, her analysis of the ways in which Black bodies are inscribed with memory and history serves to highlight the ongoing manifestation of the past in the present. Through her comparison, Jones discusses how trauma, once healed, enables the ancestral connection that leads to the recreation of promising communal and individual futures. Furthermore, to address the legitimate nature of African-based spiritual phenomenon she also illustrates the dialogical nature of Black women's writings by relating her concept of Black speculative feminism to "conjure feminism," which refers to "Black embodied theories of being and a Black womanist sense of space, time, and ethics" (Brooks et al. 452). These theories of being constitute "a way to think specifically about the enduring histories of Black women's knowledge-production that began with the lessons we learned at our grandmothers' kitchen tables and are woven into the fabric of Black women's writing practices: motherwit, root medicine, food as ancestral memory, mothering, and spirit work..." (Brooks et al. 452).

Chapter two analyzes Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* to illustrate how the obsessive need to forget the past acts as a mechanism of oppression. Jones employs Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism, a science fiction genre where African writers focus on stories that examine colonial influences and employ the genre's tropes to decolonize African cultures. This maneuver shows the importance of reconstructing cultural pasts to make liberated African futures possible, and as Jones proposes, such envisioning departs from a focus on the importance of reconstructing traditional African culture that is free from colonialism. As an example of this, Jones argues that in *Lagoon* Okorafor mobilizes the shift towards traditional Nigerian culture by imagining a spiritual awakening where the old gods come to destabilize and destroy the missionary Christian influences that have empowered European perspectives and suppressed traditional African ones. Engaging in an analysis of the returned African deities, Jones shows how they are representative of Nigerian culture and ways of being. She also articulates how the appearance of these deities and

their influence on the protagonists works to challenge the patriarchal nature of some cultural practices, such as the masquerade. Overall, this chapter continues the examination of how the reconstruction of a decolonized past is key to conceptualizing an African future that is centered on African cultural values, and in doing so, it also continues the discussion of how such recovery must also engage a matriarchal perspective.

Jones devotes chapter three to examining works that challenge the Western notion of time's linearity, a cultural understanding not shared by African-based cultures. Through the contrastive analysis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Rasheedah Phillip's *Telescoping Effect: Part One*, Jones disentangles how these two writers employ time travel to examine the ways in which it "mirrors those realities of systematic oppression that originate in the past and continue to shape the life chances of black folks in the present" (53). In this discussion, Jones highlights how the chronopolitical approach that Afrofuturism takes to memory and history is essential not only in recovering lost pasts, but also in interrogating the present and in articulating possible futures. Within the umbrella term of Afrofuturism, she examines the notions of "sankofanarration" (56) where narratives aim to preserve the past and disrupt the linearity of Western time, and Rasheedah Phillips's concept of "Black quantum futurism" (56), a chronopolitical approach to intervening in epistemological temporal notions. Both concepts address memory and temporality, and, according to Jones they resemble Butler's challenges to temporality in her fiction. Furthermore, Jones examines Butler's speculative element in *Kindred* as an example of epigenetics in order to illustrate how Butler relates the protagonist's physique to the inherent relationship between trauma and genetic inheritance. Connecting the novel's protagonist with her ancestor is, according to Jones, Butler's way of implementing restorative fabulation. Likewise, in *Telescoping Effect: Part One* Jones sees Rasheedah Phillips as examining the connection between family and genetics across time, illustrating the current cultural anxieties that arise from the relationship between time and memory. The two ideas central to the novel's plot are, firstly, exploring how memory can be employed as an economic enterprise as the protagonist connects with her ancestor through a technological company, and secondly, examining how search engines and social networks blur the line between personal and work time so that our public selves can be corporately owned, resulting in a new type of slavery. Phillips's articulation of time and memory is apparent already in the novel's title, as telescoping is a psychiatric term that refers to "a cognitive impairment in which one's understanding of linear time is disrupted" (66). Jones's analysis of these two novels shows how challenging linear time is a traditional device of Afrofuturism.

Through her analysis of Butler's *Patternist Series*, in chapter four Jones articulates how memory and dissonant voices threaten "official history" (71). Narrated in a reverse chronology, Butler's series presents a distant-future dystopian world where the society and its system derive from the history of Transatlantic Trade, and in which some humans have developed telepathic powers and are living in a feudal system where those who do not have this ability are enslaved. Central to Jones's analysis of Butler's representation of the relationship between memory and historical narrative is Pierre Nora's notion of *lieu de mémoire*, which represents a postmodern rupture of the solidity of official history. At the same time, she also critiques Nora's concept for not

taking into account the ways in which the historical narratives of minorities can work to destabilize the official narrative. To examine this mnemonic conflict, Jones highlights the centrality of Anyanwu, a shapeshifter character, who embodies Butler's interest in Igbo culture, but who also brings forward the breach in official history in Butler's Patternist series. Despite this character's ability to change bodies, they mainly inhabit a Black woman's body. As Jones argues, as in Okorafor's novel, this highlights how history is inscribed in Black bodies. Consequently, Anyanwu rises as the keeper of memories and her immortality gives her a complete vision of time with multiple conscience shifts. In this way, Jones argues that this character represents not only the circularity of Black time, but also Butler's own cautionary tale about the political dangers of forgetting oppressed people's history. Given the reverse chronological pattern of Butler's series, it is sometimes complicated to follow Jones's argument if one has not read the series. Nonetheless, Jones's work illustrates the centrality of Black Speculative fiction to enable possible futures.

In the concluding section, Jones speaks about the uncertainty of our present and emphasizes the key role that Black women's speculative fiction has in reminding us "how an understanding of the past and how we remember it are just as important in any project that purports to save ourselves from ourselves" (90). As Jones effectively argues through her volume, black women's speculative fiction generates a space where time is circular and where healing trauma and sites of memory are essential to recreate liberated futures. As a result, this volume makes a great contribution for teaching African American literature by women, and stands as a great reference book for coursework.

Biography: Patricia Coloma Peñate holds a PhD in English from Georgia State University (2012). Prior to lecturing for the Modern Languages Department at Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (UCAM) in 2015, she taught English and Spanish at Georgia State University, University of Alabama at Birmingham and Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR). She specializes in African American literature and folklore, Ethnic literatures of the US, Women Studies, and in the study of space as a metaphor in literature.

Works Cited

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