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EXPLORING THE RHETORICAL POWER OF SPECULATIVE FICTION THROUGH JEWELLE GOMEZ'S THE GILDA STORIES AND OCTAVIA BUTLER'S FLEDGLING

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EXPLORING THE RHETORICAL POWER OF SPECULATIVE FICTION
THROUGH JEWELLE GOMEZ'S THE GILDA STORIES AND OCTAVIA
BUTLER'S FLEDGLING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Monique Dixon
December 2020

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ABSTRACT

There are apparent similarities between Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*. However, this thesis will demonstrate that they share more than similar subject matter and yet differ in substantial ways. Utilizing Black feminist theory and alternative rhetoric this thesis examines how Gomez and Butler harness the potential of speculative fiction to critique the world around them and imagine an alternative world for those who are intersectionally marginalized.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Gilda Stories by Jewelle Gomez, originally published in 1991, and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*, published a little over a decade later, both center around characters that are Black, queer, female and vampire¹. I was drawn to these works because of their similarities to each other and the resemblance to my own experiences with the world. Despite their location in the world of fantasy *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling* manage to reflect the problems faced in the real world by those who face marginalization at the intersections of their various identity markers. As someone who saw themselves represented in these novels, I wanted to further explore why Gomez and Butler both chose to transform the figure of the vampire as a means to theorize about their reality.

Through the development of their protagonists Gomez and Butler explore how the intersectional nature of their identities marginalize them through the intersections of structural powers and oppressions and affect their access to subjectivity and identification as human. Although literature is not universally read as theoretical, Gomez and Butler rhetorically appropriate the genre of speculative fiction to invoke the vampire and construct their unique arguments about

¹ The creatures in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* are not technically vampires. However, the term vampire will be used to describe them because they are human-like creatures that consume blood for survival.

blackness, gender, and family, and what it means to be human outside the definitions dictated through whiteness.

In the remainder of this chapter I will outline the theoretical background that informs my analysis of *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*. In Chapter 2 I perform a close reading of *The Gilda Stories* to highlight how Gomez challenges heteronormative and binary formulations of identity. I then consider how Gomez's queering of normativity extends into the form of *The Gilda Stories*. For my third chapter I examine which aspects of *Fledgling* align with *The Gilda Stories* before turning my attention to how the novels differ. Specifically, I investigate the ways in which each novel uniquely approaches constructions of Blackness, gender, and the monstrous. I also consider how genre is utilized by both Butler and Gomez as a means for rhetorically critiquing their world. Then in the conclusion I speculate how the work of this thesis might be furthered and/or applied to other works.

Literature is Theoretical

The first premise of my thesis is that Jewelle Gomez and Octavia Butler are theorizing about their own world through the fictional worlds of their novels. To support this claim, I will consider how literary theory as produced within academia has been defined and often made inaccessible to people of color.

Charles Bressler provides a working definition of theory in his book *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. He characterizes

theory as “the assumptions (conscious or unconscious) that undergird our understanding and interpretation of language, the ways we construct meaning, and our understanding of art, culture, aesthetics, and ideologies” (Bressler 8). Bressler’s definition of theory is primarily concerned with how the reader can utilize theory to create meaning within a text and does not concern itself with how the author imbues their text with meaning.

Bressler’s definition of theory is informed by Roland Barthes’s formulation of reader response criticism, which dictates that the reader is the primary creator of meaning. In his essay “The Death of the Author,” Barthes contends that literary criticism of his time is too concerned with the writer’s intention and background. He bemoans this preoccupation, arguing that attention to the author comes with the oversight of the reader. He concludes that “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 148). According to Barthes a text should be open for the interpretation of the reader, which should not be restricted to the author’s intended meaning of their work.

When it comes to writers of color, these particular frameworks can be harmful because they prioritize the readers’ interpretation over the socio-cultural perspective of the writer. Furthermore, an audience of primarily white literary scholars may be ill-equipped to recognize and unpack the many systemic oppressive forces being addressed within a piece. However, this does not mean readers cannot interpret the meaning of a text, but rather their interpretations should be considered alongside the intent of the author.

Black feminist theorists like Barbara Christian have resisted the binary formulation of reader response criticism, insisting that authors of literature write with political intent, and understanding that intent is necessary to understanding the meaning of their work. At the same time, Christian refuses the notion that the author is the most critical component of meaning making. In her essay, "The Race for Theory" she instead contends that the race between scholars to formulate theory has redefined what literature is. She argues that the preoccupation scholars have with developing and responding to theory has resulted in the absence of scholarship on contemporary texts by people of color. Furthermore, she asserts that this movement undermines the fact that, "people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic" (Christian 52). She identifies narrative as a common medium used by POC to theorize. Christian sees the race for theory as a potential hinderance to those who study literature from POC, as they feel pressured to formulate theories in order for their work to be considered important. Christian also resists the call to create "wholesale theories" based on identities like race stating that they are "prescriptive" and "should have some relationship to practice" (Christian 53).

Intersectionality

A large portion of this thesis will work to prove that the rhetorical theorizing of Gomez and Butler center around the theory of intersectionality. In order to

support that claim, I will begin with the definition that informs my argument. In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” In her piece, Crenshaw recounts the ways that the experiences of African American women have failed to be addressed by the United States legal system. The article begins with a critique of the “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” a tendency that pervades antidiscrimination law, feminist theory, and antiracist politics (Crenshaw 139).

Crenshaw centers the experiences of Black women in her analysis to “reveal how black women have been theoretically erased” and make “more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single axis” (139-140). Crenshaw presents two court cases where the complaints, of Black women were not taken seriously, either because the judge felt their claims created a false difference between black and white women, or because it made black women the representative for all black people. Crenshaw deduces that “the assumption that [black women’s] claims of exclusion must be unidirectional” inhibits the court’s ability to deal with these cases (149). To disprove this assumption Crenshaw uses the metaphor of a car collision to exemplify how discrimination can flow from multiple directions at the same time. The refusal of the court to realize this

point dictates the identity formation of black woman and dictates that they must prioritize their blackness or their femininity.

In another metaphor she asks the reader to consider a basement that contains all disadvantaged peoples stacked on each other's shoulders all the way to a ceiling, which leads to the next floor. Those who are privileged in society reside on the floor above. The individuals closest to the basement's ceiling have the potential to be admitted onto the next floor through a hatch, however they cannot do so without the support of the people below them. Through this metaphor, Crenshaw exemplifies how Black women have often aided in the progression of antiracist and feminist groups but have rarely had their unique experiences foregrounded within them. Crenshaw takes to task these groups for failing to realize that systems of oppression buttress each other. Therefore, aiding the progression of the multi-directionally oppressed will benefit everyone. Crenshaw concludes her paper by arguing for feminist groups and Black liberationists to abandon their top down approach and asserts that attention to the most marginalized of each group will also benefit the whole. These, I argue, are the definitions of intersectionality that comes to light in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*.

Although Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, some of the concepts found in her work were being discussed long before the institutionalization of the term. In the first chapter of her book *Intersectionality*, Anna Carastathis traces the relationship between the term and its "antecedent

concepts.” She identifies these antecedents as Frances M Beal’s “double jeopardy (which she later developed into “triple jeopardy”), Claudia Jones’ “Super exploitation,” the Combahee River Collective’s “interlocking systems of oppression,” Deborah K. King’s “multiple jeopardy,” and Patricia Hill Collins’ “matrix of domination.” Carastathis argues that while each one of these shares “the use of multiple categories of oppression and identity to describe, politicize, and struggle against the conditions facing Black women in the United States” they are not interchangeable with Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” (25-26).

Carastathis works through the similarities and differences of each theory by performing close readings of critical texts, which she then compares to a reading of Crenshaw’s “intersectionality.” She concludes that while Beal’s concepts of double jeopardy and triple jeopardy, as well as Jones’ concept of super exploitation, do indeed “think integratively about multiple systems of oppression” they do not “dispute the categorical distinctions among systems” the way that Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality does (18). Meaning that intersectionality views systems of oppression like racism and sexism are connected issues that cannot be remedied separately and that they rely on each other for their respective existences. Thus Carastathis explains “that intersectionality is not merely a nominal label for a phenomena that may as well be conceptualized ‘using other concepts and frames than intersectionality’; rather, intersectionality has a determinate extension, indexes a specific set of meanings, and is motivated by particular political and theoretical concerns” (19).

After cataloging the potential predecessors of intersectionality Carastathis proceeds to examine how Crenshaw's intersectionality has come to be the most recognized and cited. She explains, "in contrast to unitary or additive approaches to theorizing oppression, which simply privilege a foundational category and either ignore or merely 'add' others to it, intersectional approaches insist that multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences" (54). While intersectionality relies on some of the same concepts as the related theories cited in her book, Carastathis maintains it is inherently different because of focus on the connected nature of oppressive systems.

In her essay "Intersectionality and its Discontents" Jennifer C. Nash expounds on Carastathis's book. She claims that Carastathis and other critics have become preoccupied with defending intersectionality against those who have begun to question "its histories and origins, its methodologies, its efficacy, its politics, its relationship to identity, [etc.]" (Nash, 118). I am not particularly interested in these disputes because I believe that intersectionality is a legitimate theory that should be defended against attempts to discredit its validity. However, I am interested in the ways that both Carastathis and Nash's work point to "intersectionality's multiple genealogies" (Nash 26). Although Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," the complex nature of oppression faced by Black women in the United States is something that has been lived and theorized in various ways over time. I propose that Butler and Gomez are participating in this

theorizing through their respective novels; in other words, I argue that both Butler and Gomez are doing the work that Christian terms theorizing through their narrative forms. This theorizing about intersectional identities centers around issues of race, gender, sexuality, and monstrosity. In the following section I provide an overview for the layered meanings of monstrosity that can be found in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*.

The Monstrous

Fledgling and *The Gilda Stories* are both centered around Black women and present theories about the intersectional nature of that identity. However, intersectionality is further complicated in each novel because the protagonists are also queer. While theorists have expanded the conversation around intersectionality to consider issues of race, gender, and sexuality; Gomez and Butler's consideration of the supernatural is unique. Though vampires are traditionally powerful beings, their incorporation does not distract from the analysis of marginalized identities because they exist on the margins as "other."

Vampires have traditionally been found in works of horror, one of the most notorious being Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In his essay "Defanging Dracula," Erik Marshall identifies social anxieties about racial impurity, changing gender roles, and relapsing technology as driving forces for the success of the novel. He argues that for readers of the time *Dracula* was a "figure of cultural, ethnic, and racial otherness" that represented "fear of a non-English invader" (289). Marshall

goes on to examine how Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation of *Dracula* transformed the vampire from fear inducing monster to misunderstood outcast.

According to Barbra Creed the increased amount of vampire films, beginning in the 1970's, can be correlated with rising fears about female sexuality and queer desire. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed takes up Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject to explore how women are often portrayed as the Other in horror films. She quotes Kristeva's definition of the abject as "that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 4). Creed explains that the abject differentiates between the subject and the partially formed subject that must be excluded because it threatens meaning. However, she explains that the abject must also be tolerated because it helps define life and is thus a portion of one's identity. Creed argues the vampire is an exemplification of the abject because the creature is often associated with queerness and hyper-sexuality. Although Creed's work is specifically concerned with film, her analysis of female sexuality and vampirism a source of fear has interesting implications for how the two are depicted in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*.

Although the vampire has not been historically linked to blackness it has been related to fears of a racial "other" and monstrosity. In her book, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe explores how Black bodies though viewed as objects were forcefully subjected through the monstrous and identifies slavery as the impetus for the relationship between

blackness and monstrosity. She begins her book with Frederick Douglass' metaphor of the blood-stained gate as an example of the kind of monstrous violence through which Black individuals are made subjects. However, she asserts that for the slave the process of subjectification was also the process of objectification and that these "processes of subjectification" are ongoing continuing from slavery into the postmodern. Sharpe's work also highlights the monstrous nature of subjectivity and considers how those allowed to author their own subjectification are also affected by the relationship to the monstrous. Thus, the slave master as well as the slave were defined and affected by the monstrous nature of slavery. Through this analysis, Sharpe complicates the distinctions between subject and object.

Although Creed's work focuses on the abject nature of the feminine and Sharpe's focuses on the monstrous nature of blackness, both have to deal with the connections between monstrosity and subjectivity. While Creed considers how the abject Other allows the subject to identify itself, Sharpe argues that subjectivity is only accessible to black people through objectification and violence. Though seemingly different the connections between these two arguments becomes more apparent when considering the protagonists in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*, who are both Black and vampire. These characters by Creed and Sharpe's definitions occupy the unique space of subject, object, and abject.

Alternative Rhetoric

Since the reader-response oriented definition of theory does not allow room to fully consider how authors – and particularly authors of color – theorize through the narrative form, this thesis follows a genealogy of literary theory and theorizing that can be located in works by black feminist scholars like Christian. This will allow me to examine how Gomez and Butler utilize the narrative form of speculative fiction to formulate meaningful theories about blackness, queerness, gender, and intersectionality.

Through their theorizing Gomez and Butler construct arguments about what it means to have intersectional identities. I assert that these arguments exemplify an alternative rhetoric as defined by David Wallace in his essay, “Alternative Rhetoric and Morality: Writing from the Margins.” In his work, Wallace explains that rhetoric and composition alone, as they currently stand, cannot “address systemic marginalization in American society” or in their respective fields (W18). He asserts that an alternative rhetorical practice should acknowledge the ways that the field is complicit in discourses of power and recognize that the consequences of those discourses are more severe for marginalized and underrepresented people. To better understand this relationship, he points to concepts like intersectionality and disidentification as a potential starting point for developing a definition of alternative rhetoric.

First Wallace utilizes Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality to support his claim that subjectivity “cannot be reduced to a single binary identity

feature” (W21). Thus, an alternative rhetoric should concern itself with addressing the “contingent nature of subjectivity” (W20). Next Wallace borrows the terms disidentification from José Esteban Muñoz. He argues that disidentification “is critical for an alternative conception of rhetorical agency” because it empowers marginalized groups to reclaim labels that have previously been used to oppress them (W22). Wallace argues that this is one of the avenues that marginalized people can take to create copresence with their oppressors. Wallace stresses that agency for the oppressed is not the sole purpose for alternative rhetoric, as that would place too much responsibility on the oppressed and create a false binary of oppressed/oppressor. Instead alternative rhetoric “takes as its goal the unseating of oppression” and “requires a new understanding of and accounting for one’s participation within systems of power” (W23).

Furthermore, Wallace recognizes that an alternative rhetoric may appear in varying genres and styles. In “Defining Alternative Rhetoric: Embracing Intersectionality and Owning Opacity, the first chapter of a larger work, Wallace expands on his definition of alternative rhetoric established in his 2009 article. He argues “rhetoric becomes alternative when it engages the individual’s subjectivity rather than attempting to erase it and accounts for the positioning of that subjectivity within the discourse of power that enfranchise some and marginalize others” (5). Similar to the work of his article, Wallace identifies intersectionality as a key concept of alternative rhetoric. He also identifies five elements from queer

theory that could aid in the development of an alternative rhetoric, however for my thesis I will focus on his use of intersectionality and disidentification. Wallace concludes with the argument that “a wider range of discourse practices” should be considered as rhetoric. This particular argument aligns well with Barbara Christian’s and I use it to assert that the narrative forms of *Fledgling* and *The Gilda Stories* are both theoretical and rhetorical. Wallace’s article is essential to my thesis because it establishes a relationship between rhetoric, intersectionality, and disidentification. I argue that Butler and Gomez are engaging in disidentification by reclaiming the monstrous label that has been placed on Black women and repurposing it to argue that intersectional identities are powerful.

While Wallace focuses on the rhetorical capabilities of narrative forms in general, this argument can be more specifically applied to the genres of *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*. Gwendolyn D. Pough and Yolanda begin their editorial remarks on, *Speculative Black Women: Magic, Fantasy, and the Supernatural*, with a summary of Octavia Butler’s keynote address at Howard University in 2003. They focus on her proposition that “science fiction is not only *about* the problems of the world, but also about *solving* the problems of the world.” Following this line of thought, they examine how Black women have utilized the realm of speculative fiction to contemplate how we might solve some of the world’s problems. I propose that Gomez and Butler occupy the space of speculative fiction rhetorically to critique our world and disidentify identity labels that tie intersectionally marginalized identities to the monstrous.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GILDA STORIES

Fear of the Other is a recurring theme in vampire novels. In these works, the vampire is often interpreted as a symbol for racial difference or queerness. The vampire has also been associated with apprehension surrounding unchecked female sexuality. However, issues of race, sexuality, and gender are seldom addressed simultaneously within these texts. In *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Jewelle Gomez brings to life a Black queer female vampire. Through the creation of this intersectional character Gomez addresses racism, misogyny, and homophobia not only as separate issues but as intersecting problems. However, she does not solely consider the potentially oppressive consequences of intersectionality she utilizes it to queer Blackness, gender, familial structures, and the conceived separation between the human and the vampiric. Gomez then considers how intersectionally marginalized identities are linked to the monstrous and how a disidentification with the monstrous label can have powerful and beneficial repercussions for those who are facing oppression in the intersections.

I use the term queer to encompass the action of resisting definitions of “normality.” In the introduction to their book, *Queering the Non/Human*, Noreen Giffney and Myra L. Hird consider the complicated history of the term “queer theory” before deciding on a definition they will use for their work: “Queer is employed here as a collection of methodologies to unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences and in-between spaces” (5). They also resist the idea that there is

a singular queer theory and instead follow Donald E. Hall's claim that there are "only many different voices and sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent perspectives that can loosely be called 'queer theories'" (5). Hird and Giffeney also highlight that while definitions of queer theory are often slippery there is more consensus about what it does or calls us to do:

"resist, reclaim, invent, oppose, defy, make trouble for, open up, enrich, facilitate, disturb, produce, undermine, expose, make visible, critique, reveal, move beyond, transgress, subvert, unsettle, challenge, celebrate, interrogate, counter, provoke and rebel" (5).

In my thesis I also focus on what queerness does. More specifically, I argue that the characters within *The Gilda Stories* challenge heteronormative and Eurocentric understandings of Blackness, gender, family, and the monstrous. Through this queering they prove that these identity markers are not monolithic or even binary but instead exist along a spectrum.

The Gilda Stories details the life of Gilda, a Black queer woman beginning with her escape from slavery in 1850. Each chapter (short story) details a new period in Gilda's long life as she struggles to maintain her connection to humanity after becoming a vampire. *The Gilda Stories* opens with the jarring scene of Gilda escaping a brutal rape by killing her attacker. Moments away from being forcefully penetrated she stabs her assailant and is covered in his blood. Gilda penetrating the man is expressed through symbolic language and is the novel's first depiction of a disrupted gender normativity:

She closed her eyes. He rubbed his body against her brown skin and imagined the closing of her eyes was a need for him and his power. He started to enter her, but before his hand finished pulling her open, while it still tingled with the softness of her insides, she entered him with her heart which was now a wood-handled knife (11).

In this depiction the man's sex is equated to power, however the assumed dominance that he assumes is co-opted by Gilda when she stabs him. The knife is originally referred to as her heart signifying the innocence that is lost in this exchange.

In addition, this scene can be interpreted as Gilda's red stained gate into subjectivity, as described by Christina Sharpe in *Monstrous Intimacies*. Sharpe contends that for black people the introduction to subjectivity is often marred with violence and coupled with objectification. This analysis is reflected in the adulteration of Gilda's innocence, the objectification of her body, and the violent lengths she must take to preserve her life. Sharpe also argues that this monstrous violence has become intimate, familiar, and normalized for black people. Gilda's reaction to her ordeal reinforces that contention, "Looking down at the at the blood soaking her shirt and trousers she felt no disgust" (12). Gilda's indifference to the blood on her clothing suggests a level of familiarity. Gilda not only fails to be disgusted by the blood covering her she describes it as cleansing and compares it to the intimacy of the first bath she received from her mother.

She also recognizes the blood as sign “of her continued life” foreshadowing her future vampiric nature.

The disruption of gender normativity in this scene is taken up by Christopher S. Lewis in his essay “Queering Personhood in the Neo-Slave Narrative: Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*.” He begins his close reading of the excerpt with an explanation of Hortense Spillers’ concept which conducts a close reading of a scene from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by Herself* to argue that Black gender has been neuter-bound. More specifically that the sexual violence perpetrated against enslaved Black people marked them as “gender indeterminate and incapable of penetration” (Lewis 448). Lewis then synthesizes Spillers’ work with Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman’s to conclude that “antebellum characterization of black gender and sexuality as queer played a major role in delineating what constitutes power, blackness, whiteness, sexual normality and personhood in U.S culture” (Lewis 448). Lewis follows by applying this argument to the opening rape scene of *The Gilda Stories*. He states:

“My reading of Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* seeks to move critical conversation about neo-slave narratives into this queer-positive territory by highlighting the novel’s positioning of gender and sexual normativity as regimes of enslavement and queer gender and sexuality as means of liberation. The novel challenges the notion of the neuter-bound antebellum black gender in the sense that it represents black resistance to violation but, at the same time, values the notion of neuter-bound black gender by

celebrating the performances of radical black subjectivity that can result from gender indeterminacy” (Lewis 449).

Lewis’ arguments stress that gender performance and race are linked in the U.S imagination, and those links define whiteness as well as Blackness. Focusing in on the rape scene Lewis resists the idea that Gilda stabbing her attacker exemplifies a reversal of neuter-bound Blackness. Since Gilda has already been violated by the man and slavery, he insists that Gilda cannot undo history and therefore cannot reverse the racialization that leaves her vulnerable.

Furthermore, he argues that scene is indicative of the intersubjective nature of whiteness and Blackness with one depending on the other for definition. Lewis concludes his reading of the scene with the suggestion that Gilda views the attacker as a “love object” whose offense must be responded to with love.

Lewis’s assertions about neuter-bound Blackness and the lack of access Black women have to gender are compelling and not only well supported, they are exemplified by the androgynous nature of Gilda and other women in the novel. His arguments about race and gender being inextricably linked are also evident within the novel and fall in line with my own intersectional reading of the text. However, these constructions do not fully capture what Gomez is doing to the concept of gender. This scene as well as others throughout the novel move beyond arguing that race and gender are linked and do more than suggest that Black people should embrace their labels as socially monstrous rather than aspire to whiteness, which is synonymous with the human. Gomez’s depiction of

her characters and how they perform gender contradicts the man/woman binary not only as something inaccessible for Black people but for everyone.

Lewis's interpretation that Gilda regards her attacker with love can also be expounded upon. While on top of Gilda her attacker interprets her closed eyes as a "need for him and his power" (11). Gilda's attacker is under the impression that the power he wields over her, she may desire to wield over someone else. However, Gilda combating his violence with her symbolic heart proves that she does not aspire to have his power and would rather approach others with compassion. This does not render her passive, however. In this scene and in others she uses violence as a tool to protect herself and her family.

The Gilda Stories is full of characters who disrupt the gender binary and gender normative performance one of which is Marcie, Gilda's neighbor while she is living in New York. Gilda observes Marcie's gender disruption from her apartment, "During the day he was Marc at his job at the telephone company. He had been one of the first male operators and he wore it as a badge of honor. But what he wore best were sable eyelashes and capri pants" (173). Marcie performs masculinity as a means of protecting himself, however at home he is allowed to embrace femininity. Although it is clear from the descriptions of Marcie that he is non-heteronormative his identity is not labeled (i.e. gay, trans, non-binary, fluid, etc.). Thus, Marcie's character represents more than a queering of gender. The fact that he and Gilda perform masculinity and femininity queers the notion of a gender binary and troubles the distinction between what is "man" and

what is “woman.” Furthermore, Marcie’s character proves that a binary formulation of gender is not only inaccessible to Black people but to other people of color as well.

Another character that queers gender expectations is Gilda’s namesake and the vampire partially responsible for turning her. Following her escape from slavery Gilda is discovered and taken in by this brothel owning vampire. During their first interaction she observes that the 1st Gilda is a small white woman wearing men’s clothing. However, in later interactions she begins to question if 1st Gilda is in fact a small man. However, 1st Gilda’s gender is not the only obscure aspect of her identity. Gilda also notices that despite 1st Gilda’s face being “painted in colors like a mask”, it reminds her of her mother’s (13). During 1st Gilda’s recollection of her childhood her people are described as having “burnished” skin. These descriptions contradict Gilda’s original interpretations of 1st Gilda as white and suggest that she might be passing.

1st Gilda’s masquerade as a white woman in men’s clothing coincides with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. The first chapter of *The Gilda Stories* takes place during 1850, during which time a black woman would be unable to own property as she would be considered property herself. Furthermore, a black woman’s intersectionally marginalized identity would leave her vulnerable to sexual violence and undermine her ability to run a business. Therefore, as discussed in Crenshaw’s work, it is not 1st Gilda’s race or gender in an additive formation which marginalize her but the two in conjunction, as

needing each other for their structural coherence. Thus, she might find it beneficial to not only conceal her blackness, but also perform masculinity.

Although Gilda never passes as white her relationship to Blackness is complicated by her gender and the time she spent as a slave. Throughout each stage in her life Gilda attempts to maintain a connection to Blackness typically choosing to live near Black people because “Her connection to the daylight world came from her blackness” (180). However, despite her physical proximity to Blackness Gilda struggles to connect because of her vampirism. She struggles with guilt and feels “chagrined by her concept of *they* and how her life separated her from them” (112). Another reason that Gilda may feel disconnected from Black people is because her perception of Blackness is rooted in her time as a slave whereas her Black companions have only experienced slavery’s aftermath. Throughout the novel Gilda is plagued with memories of her time as a slave. The haunting nature of Gilda’s past can be understood as a more literal portrayal of the haunting described by Christina Sharpe in *Monstrous Intimacies*. According to Sharpe the monstrous subjection of Black bodies during slavery has manifested in the postmodern. Therefore, all of the characters wrestle with the ramifications of slavery, however this struggle is made more apparent through Gilda who has to wrestle with her knowledge of the past. In the last chapter set in 2050, 200 years after she escaped slavery, Gilda faces the threat of being enslaved again by vampire hunters. Although the vampire hunters pose an

impending threat to all vampires, Gilda's fear is unique because she is the only one that has experienced enslavement before.

“Thoughts of the Hunters, armed with drugs and other weapons to ensnare her and her family, caused Gilda to shiver with the memory of her escape from the plantation. In unsuspecting moments, she felt the bounty hunter's hand on her childishly thin ankle as he dragged her from beneath the hay. Those who came now were more silent, more expert, but essentially the same. Their approach filled her with a familiar terror.” (234)

In this excerpt the trauma that has been haunting Gilda since she escaped transforms from an emotional scar to a physical threat. While her vampiric family is also facing attack, their fear is based on the unknown not past trauma. That is not to say the other characters have not had to cope with the lingering effects of slavery, but rather that Gilda's unique experience makes slavery's haunting tangible.

Gilda's ties to the past and her time as a slave informs her relationship to blackness and thus her relationship to other Black people. This becomes apparent when she meets Julius off-Broadway in 1971. Julius works for an all-white theater company but feels unfulfilled because he longs for his past days of activism during the civil rights movement. One night he and Gilda, who is currently working at the same company, go out to eat and end up discussing Blackness and their political beliefs. Before they delve into the conversation Gilda is short with Julius and disconnected, “his separateness as a mortal felt like an

impenetrable curtain between them” (169). However, as their conversation develops it is more than Julius’ humanness that causes a distance between them. When Gilda asks why Julius is discontent working for a white company he responds, “I made all the sit-ins for the movement. While I was in college, protest was practically a credit course! Suddenly I look up and find all of my dashikis folded at the bottom of a trunk and I’m helping manage money for a group of middle-class white kids who want to play theater” (169). His response indicates that for Julius his identity and his Blackness were tied to his active participation in the civil rights movement. “The movements of the sixties had fueled Julius’ vision of the future, too, but to Gilda, George Jackson’s death this past September signaled the death of that era. Angela was somewhere out there alone now with a cause but no community. The horror of slavery appeared to reap endless returns” (180). Even though Julius is struggling to find meaning in his personal life Gilda recognizes that the civil rights movement filled him with hope for the future. However, that hope is stifled by the pragmatic realities of capitalism. Following the civil rights movement Julius is forced to take a job that he hates working for people that he disdains just so that he can survive. For Julius protesting and fighting for his humanity gave him purpose which was then disrupted by the constraints of capitalism. Furthermore, Julius only knows how to enact his Blackness in reaction to the threat of whiteness. When they first arrive at the restaurant, he asks “How’d we end up working our asses off for this little white company when we’re supposed to be off nation building?” (168). This

remark as well as his sentiments about the civil rights movement reflect that Julius's invocation of Blackness is always in response to whiteness. Outside of the struggle for liberation Julius fails to connect with his Blackness or other Black people.

On the other hand Gilda is not beholden to these same limitations. As a vampire Gilda does not have to abide by capitalistic ideals to survive and she does not have to get a job to provide herself with food or shelter. Because the only sustenance she needs comes from people Gilda is able to access her Blackness without it being a response to whiteness. Unlike Julius who struggles to find commonality with other Black people outside of resistance to whiteness, Gilda seeks out Black people for community. This is apparent when she moves to Rosebud, Mississippi in 1921 and becomes invested in Aurelia. Or when she travels to the south end of Boston in 1955 and risks her own life to save the lives of her new friends Savannah and Toya. Throughout the novel Gilda strives to be close to Blackness which grounds her in her humanity.

The juxtaposition between how Julius embodies Blackness and how Gilda depends on it, showcases the detrimental nature of whiteness. Because Julius has always had to be worried about the threat of whiteness, he has never been able to view his Blackness outside of that context. As a vampire Gilda is no longer threatened by whiteness which allows her to personify Blackness which is not defined through whiteness.

At one point during their conversation Gilda and Julius begin to discuss the Attica riot of 1971. Julius expresses that news coverage of the events have filled him with rage and longing for his days of activism. For Gilda, the events trigger memories of her time as a slave. “She’d seen the pictures of inmates killing and being killed, lined up in the prison yard, and the image was always the same as her memories of the slave quarters: dark men with eyes full of submission and rage” (169). Although it manifests differently Julius and Gilda are both painfully affected by the plight of Black people and the differences between them seem small. However, because Gilda has lived through slavery, she is able to clearly see history repeating itself. Her understanding that current events are related to her past and slavery allow her a unique perspective that separates her from other Black people like Julius.

In addition, Gilda also does not share Julius’s veneration for the civil rights movement because, “They had a big dream about black men being free, but that was as far as it went. They really didn’t have a full vision – you know women being free, homosexuals being free. So, things kind of folded in on themselves” (170). For Julius, the civil rights movement has been the defining and triumphant moment in his struggle towards freedom as a Black man. On the other hand, Gilda who had to fight and kill for her own physical freedom understands that the civil rights movement, though well intentioned, was primarily concerned about the freedom of Black men and failed to consider how women, queer people, or other people of color were also seeking freedom. Her argument that this is shortsighted

echoes Crenshaw's metaphor about the basement of oppression. Because Gilda is a Black queer woman, she understands that while the civil rights movement benefitted from the efforts of people like herself, it did not actively work to secure their freedom. On the other hand, Julius directly benefitted from his position as a heterosexual man and the focal point of the civil rights movement. Gilda's encounter with Julius showcases that Blackness is not monolithic.

The queering of concepts like Blackness, gender, and family that occur within *The Gilda Stories* serve to prove that those with intersectionally marginalized identities will never be able to fit within identity markers defined through whiteness. Thus, these individuals will always be marked as Other and monstrous. In her book *Black Women Writing and Identity*, Carole Boyce Davies develops the concept of migratory subjectivities. In the first chapter of her book Davies asks the reader to consider the implications of identity labels, in particular "Black" and "Blackness". She asserts that "'Blackness' is a color-coded, politically-based term of marking and definition which only has meaning when questions of racial difference and in particular, white supremacy are deployed" (5). She insists that "Blackness [...] has more to do with a sometimes essentialized, tactical assertion as a counterpoint to overwhelming 'whiteness' or Eurocentricity, which tries to pose itself as unmarked but is historically linked to technologies of destruction"(6). Instead she turns to "Black" as a provisional identity marker that counteracts the attempts of whiteness to normalize itself.

Davies's analysis of how Blackness is linked to and defined through whiteness highlights why the interpretations of different identity labels found within *The Gilda Stories* are atypical. Expectations about what is normal or expected do not exist within the realm of the novel as the characters queer any labels that rely on whiteness as the norm and render them obsolete. "Blackness," according to Davies, is dependent on whiteness for definition and meaning. This interpretation can be seen in the character of Julius who loses his sense of purpose when his fight against whiteness is supposedly done. However other characters like Gilda find ways to connect to their Blackness that are about more than just providing an antithesis to whiteness. These characters (primarily women) find ways to connect with each other across time, age, and cultural backgrounds proving that Blackness is not monolithic.

Due to their long lives the vampires in *The Gilda Stories* are unable to maintain close relationships with their relatives without raising suspicion. Rather than remain alone they seek out other vampires or turn the humans they become close with. Once Gilda was rescued by the 1st Gilda she lived at her brothel Woodard's with her and her companion Bird before they turned her. During their time together 1st Gilda and Bird become like mother's to Gilda as they educate and care for her. After her transformation and 1st Gilda's passing, Gilda maintains the close relationship that she had developed with Bird, and when Bird decides she needs space, Gilda connects with Anthony and Sorel who become a part of her family as well. Later, when Gilda decides to turn Julius, he also enters the

family. The way in which Gilda builds connections and claims individuals as her family is not unlike the community building that occurs when queer individuals are rejected by their blood relatives. However, it is not solely the lack of a shared genetic background that makes Gilda's interpretation of family unique. Due to their long lives and the intimacy of their relationships, titles like mother, sister, brother, or lover fail to encompass each individual's function within the family. For instance, the mother-daughter relationship that Gilda and Bird share shifts as time progresses. During chapter one Bird spends most of her time with Gilda teaching her how to read, do math, and speak different languages. She also shares her history and details how she survived smallpox, which were given to the Lakota by traders, and as a result was cast out as a witch. She is later found and turned by 1st Gilda who she shares a close connection with. However, 1st Gilda grows tired of her long existence and decides to end her life, which Bird finds difficult to accept. Worried about leaving her companion alone, 1st Gilda decides to turn Gilda and utilizes the transformation process to solidify the mother daughter relationship between her and Bird. In order to complete the change blood must be exchanged twice. Since she intends for Gilda to be a companion for Bird, 1st Gilda does not complete the process. She instructs Gilda to ask Bird to "complete the circle" and explains "it is she who will make you our daughter" (47). Later, Bird's exchange with the Girl invokes the same symbolism of motherhood, with the Girl drinking blood from Bird's chest as if she is being

nursed. As indicated by 1st Gilda's instructions Gilda is not only transitioning into a vampire, she is also becoming solidified as their daughter.

Despite their close relationship solidified through the exchange of blood, Bird is unable to cope with the loss of her companion and begins to blame Gilda. Aware that Gilda will need guidance she stays with her a while but eventually goes off on her own to grieve. After almost a hundred years, Bird and Gilda reconnect however their relationship transforms from mother and daughter to lovers. After some time together they separate again however this time they are not at odds and their relationship makes another transition to something similar to sisters. Regardless of the time spent apart or how their relationship dynamic shifts Gilda and Bird remain close and continue to identify each other as family.

The relationship that Gilda cultivates with Julius later in the novel transforms in a similar fashion. Although they begin as lovers, the relationship they share is more akin to siblings by the end of the novel. Although the way that Gilda reacts with her chosen family does shift the intimacy and closeness that she shares with each of them is consistent. The evolutions of Gilda's relationships are not clear-cut shifts from one type of connection to another. Instead the individuals she is close to appear to occupy multiple positions in her life simultaneously. This seems to suggest a redefining not only of the term family but also the labels we associate with it. Through her memories of the past it is revealed that Gilda had a family prior to escaping slavery. However in those memories she reveals that the connection she was allowed to have with her

family and in particular her mother was limited. The understanding that family is something Gilda was denied access to through slavery makes her reclamation and reauthoring of family more apparently subversive. Furthermore, Gilda's memories of the past showcase that familial labels were not created with Black people in mind.

Prior to her transformation Gilda does not have a name and is referred to only as the Girl. After 1st Gilda passes, Bird informs her that 1st Gilda wanted Gilda to take her name. The passing of her name solidifies the familial relationship that they share. Furthermore, it disrupts the expectation that names are passed from father to son. As a slave, Gilda's human mother was only allowed to pass on her status as slave; she was not even allotted the opportunity to name her child (Newman). Likewise, Gilda's father was unable to participate in the patriarchal tradition of passing on his name to his offspring. Through the gift of her name 1st Gilda undermines this construction of slavery which worked to deny the slaves access to the label of human. As the descendant of a slave mother the only existence available to Gilda would be that of a slave. However, once she takes on the role of mother 1st Gilda is able to pass on freedom to her vampiric daughter. While Gomez follows "partus sequitur ventrem" and passes the access to subjectivity through the mother she uses the world of fantasy to argue that Black mothers had more than just subjugation to pass to their offspring.

One way to understand the troubling of normativity that occurs within *The Gilda Stories* is through the queer theory concept of disidentification. In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Jose Esteban Munoz describes disidentification as that which, “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). In his introduction Munoz considers the difficulties that “those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component” might face when enacting their own identities. He summarizes Michel Pecheux’s theory that there are three ways in which the subject is constructed: 1) identification 2) counteridentification and 3) disidentification which he explains as “working on and against dominant ideology”. The characters within *The Gilda Stories* portray the third mode of identification described by Munoz, in that they refuse to assimilate to the dominant ideology, but they do not strictly oppose it either (11). By disrupting the systems that prescribe normalcy through whiteness, characters like Gilda complicate the aspects of their identity which mark them as Other. Unlike counteridentification which would indicate a complete rejection of labels placed on them by society, disidentification allows each character to challenge the meanings of the labels used to define them.

Through disidentification *The Gilda Stories* contradicts clear cut definitions of concepts like Blackness, gender, and family. But it also disidentifies the

monstrous label. Although *The Gilda Stories* is understood as a vampire novel the word vampire is not used to describe any of the blood drinking characters until the last chapter. Despite the avoidance of the word it is understood that Gilda and other characters in the novel are vampires because they consume human blood to survive. However, through her strategic avoidance of the term Gomez ensures that her characters are understood as different from the traditional trope of the vampire. Erik Marshall points out in his essay “Defanging Dracula: The Disappearing Other in Coppola's Bram Stoker's Dracula” that modern interpretations of the vampire have become more human and sympathetic. The vampires within *The Gilda Stories* follow this trend as many of them struggle to maintain their humanity and engage with their communities. One of the ways in which they do this is maintaining a sense of morality and ethics that their family follows.

One of the morals which are instilled in Gilda early on is how to feed properly. Bird informs Gilda that when she feeds, she should not take more than she needs and instructs her to “Feel what they are needing, not what you are hungering for. You leave them with something new and fresh, something wanted. Let their joy fill you. That is the only way to share and not to rob” (50). Traditional vampires like Dracula are known for being horrific figures that take their victims blood and either kill them or change them in the process. Unlike their predecessors most of the vampires in *The Gilda Stories* follow the rules and avoid killing, those who do not are shunned. One of the vampires that fails to

abide by the code of ethics is Samuel. In the second chapter of the book Gilda travels to Yerba Buena California to visit with Anthony and Sorel old friends of the 1st Gilda. While there she is introduced to and becomes infatuated with Eleanor, one of Sorel's offspring who is prone to making rash and selfish decisions. One of these decisions included turning Samuel and his wife and then turning a blind eye he murdered his wife to be with her. Unsited for the life of a vampire Samuel becomes possessive of Eleanor and almost kills Gilda in a jealous rage. Realizing the monstrous nature within Samuel and the carelessness Eleanor changed him, Gilda distances herself and leaves Yerba Buena. Later Eleanor ends her life and Samuel is left without a family making him even more erratic. He becomes dangerous to the vampires around him and shows no regard for human life. Angry and alone he later tries to manipulate Gilda into taking a life herself.

Another vampire who does not follow the code established by Gilda and her family is Fox, a pimp in the south end of Boston in the 1950's. Notorious for his violence towards women Fox is feared by the south end community. One of Fox's girls, a teenager name Toya, decides to quit and return home to New Orleans. Fox who has physically abused the girl refuses to let her go. Fox is determined to either recapture or murder the girl and Gilda determines the only way to save her is to kill Fox first.

Samuel and Fox are evidence that Gomez does not wish to entirely rid vampires of monstrous label and make them more humane. Instead she troubles

the distinction and implies that the difference between monster and human is not clear cut. This is further proved by the violent acts committed by humans. For example, the man who attempted to rape Gilda at the beginning novel or the hunters who attempt to enslave her towards the end. These instances as well as the efforts Gilda and her family make to maintain their humanity work to trouble our understanding of the monstrous.

Moreover, *The Gilda Stories*' queering of a subjectivity based on whiteness is reflected in the structure of the novel, which is arguably not a novel at all. Rather than a linear narrative composed of chapters, *The Gilda Stories* offers short stories that transfer Gilda and the reader to different time periods and locations throughout United States history. However, the sections are not disjointed, and while each "chapter" introduces new characters and challenges for Gilda, this does not distract from the novel's themes of queerness, race, and intersectional subjectivity. Rather, the structure of the novel is yet another way that Gomez queers expectations of normalcy. This troubling can also be seen in the novel's genre as well. While readers may anticipate a horror novel since the subject matter includes vampires *The Gilda Stories* is more akin to speculative fiction. That is not to say there are no elements of horror evident in the novel, however most of that horror stems from the effects of unchecked white supremacy and expectations of normalcy.

In an abbreviated version of her thesis Hanna-Rikka Roine examines the rhetoric of worldbuilding found in speculative fiction. She introduces "speculative

worldbuilding as a rhetorical and communicative practice, were the abstract and remote ideas are brought to the domain of the concrete and possible". This duality, she argues "engages the users to imagine alternatives and possibilities and hands them tools to consciously reflect on the ways they do this." Thus, she asserts speculative fiction draws our attention to our reality and questions why it exists as it does and how it might exist differently.

The rhetorical worldbuilding discussed in Roine's work can be found in *The Gilda Stories*. The novel depicts a fictional world with vampiric creatures, but the fantastic elements are a means to make the reader reflect on the realities of our world. In *The Gilda Stories*, Gomez is able to depict how our perception and performance of Blackness has shifted over the years. However, that is only made possible through Gilda's vampiric nature which makes her immortal and allows her the ability to observe these different time periods. As Roine explained in her essay the fictional world *The Gilda Stories* not only allows an escape into fantasy they encourage the reader to question aspects of their reality.

CHAPTER THREE

FLEDGLING

Although published almost a decade later, *Fledgling* bears a shocking resemblance to *The Gilda Stories*. Both works center protagonists that are Black queer female and vampire. Both novels also queer definitions of Blackness, gender, family, and monstrosity to theorize what is made possible through intersectionality. *Fledgling*, Octavia Butler's final novel published in 2005, follows Shori, a young Black female vampiric creature who has lost her memory in an attack on her family. As she struggles to remember who and what she is, Shori is faced with racism and questions about the authenticity of her identity. However, Shori's Blackness which separates her from the rest of her kind, also makes her more fit for survival. Moreover, the intersections of her identity as Black, queer, young and female serve to make her more powerful than the fair-skinned males of her species and contradict the assumption that an intersectionally marginalized identity is a deficit.

In *The Gilda Stories*, Blackness grounds the main character in her humanity. Instead of impeding her, Blackness serves Gilda in her attempts to form meaningful connections with others who are like her. That is not to say that Gilda does not face adversity due to her race, but rather that her blackness is not depicted as an obstacle she must overcome. Similarly, Butler queers Blackness by highlighting the ways in which Blackness is a benefit rather than a deficit.

At the beginning of *Fledgling*, Shori is suffering from a traumatic brain injury and is unable to remember her family or who she is. After some investigation she learns that she is a species called Ina and that her family was assassinated due to their experimentation with genetics of which she is the result. Their experiment aimed to make their kind less sensitive to the sun which prevented them from waking and severely burned them. Their solution was to infuse their own DNA with that of a Black human so that their offspring would inherit a darker complexion. As a result, Shori was unlike anyone else within her species. She possessed dark skin, the ability to stay awake during the day, and while direct sunlight still burned her, she was not fully incapacitated. For Shori's family Blackness is seen as a positive attribute that has the potential to secure the future of their offspring.

However, in an effort to showcase Blackness in a positive light Butler does not counteridentify with the negative rhetoric that usually ties Blackness to monstrosity. Shori's family believed that racism was a human affliction and others of their species would welcome their success. For the most part they were correct; however, a few were troubled by the development and viewed Shori's existence as a threat and an abomination. So much so that they murdered her entire family. When confronted with their crimes the guilty parties use Shori's Blackness to undermine her existence as Ina, similar to how Black people have had their existence as human undermined. In her book, *The Origin of Others*, Toni Morrison examines how Black people have historically been identified as

“other” and denied the identification of human. She showcases how the construction of Black people as “not recognizably human” was upheld not only culturally but scientifically as well. She proposes that “one purpose of scientific racism is to identify an outsider in order to define one’s self” (ch.1). Thus, Blacks were useful and “vital to a white definition of humanity” (ch.2). Without Blackness providing a definition of what humanity is not the white construction of the human would fail. Morrison also considers the monstrous nature of slavery. She argues that the violent acts perpetuated by slaveholders in an attempt to uphold these distinctions “and define the slave as inhuman, savage” are “desperate attempt[s] to confirm one’s own self as normal” (chp.2). However, according to Morrison this violence results in the definition of the inhuman being more applicable to the slaveholders than to the slaves they wish to ascribe it to.

Shori’s Blackness separates her from her kind, and her distinct phenotype provides her with an extra advantage. However, this advantage will not only benefit Shori it will benefit her offspring and ensure the continuation of her family. Furthermore, it benefits the Ina that tried to murder her, as they are able to define themselves through defining her as “other”. During the trial that is supposed to address the murder of her family, Shori’s validity as Ina is interrogated instead, not unlike the scientific racism described by Morrison certain members of the council point to Shori’s height, complexion, and loss of memory to scientifically discredit her as Ina.

Despite the negative reactions from some of her kind, Shori embraces her Blackness and attempts to form meaningful relationships with Black people. Prior to the death of her family Shori had connections to Black people through her human mother (the woman who gave her DNA for the experiment) as well as her brother who also resulted from the genetic experiment. However, those connections were lost when Shori loses her memory. As the only Black Ina left, the only other place she can see herself represented is with Black humans. Still unaware of what she is, Shori unwittingly develops a relationship with her first symbiont Wright, a white man. Because Shori is suffering from amnesia she is unable to warn Wright what he is signing up for when they exchange blood. Ina blood is addictive to humans and Wright quickly becomes devoted to Shori and unwilling to leave her side. However, her ignorance means that she was unable to warn him that she will have to have other symbionts to survive. When Shori takes on two of her father's symbionts Wright is able to contain his jealousy because they are women and he does not feel threatened by them sexually. However, when Shori agrees to accept a male, Joel, as her symbiont Wright becomes weary and grows even more upset when he realizes that Joel is Black. While Joel represents a threat for Wright he represents a sense of familiarity for Shori. Upon meeting him for the first time she remarks "this man was dark skinned as I was and had hair like mine" (154). Shori is unable to see herself represented in her species because no one shares her phenotype. Even her brother Stefan who also resulted from her mother's experiments was of a lighter

complexion. When Shori visits her father's settlement prior to his murder she is introduced to a few of his symbionts. A couple of them draw her attention, "Two of them, Esther and Celia, had skin as dark as mine, and I looked at them with interest. They were the first Black people I remembered meeting. And yet the genes for my dark skin had to have come from someone like these women" (76). The feeling of otherness that Shori experiences among Ina is somewhat alleviated by the shared physical characteristics between her and the Black humans she encounters.

In *The Gilda Stories* gender is queered through a performance of masculine and feminine. Gilda, 1st Gilda, and Marc/Marcie all defy gender expectations through their clothing and their rejection of gender normativity. *Fledgling* also challenges gender expectations however rather than focusing on the individual society's interpretation of gender is shown to be a human construct separate from sex. While female Ina do bear and care for the children as human females do, the assumption that they would also be the "weaker" sex and take on the stereotypical role of human women does not apply. In fact, female Ina are stronger than male Ina and their venom which is addictive to humans is also addictive to their male counterparts. So much so that once a male Ina has been bitten by a female Ina and her sisters, he will be unable to mate with any other Ina female family. In the novel the process by which female Ina go about securing mates is compared to male humans,

“Now females find mates for their sons, and males for their daughters, and it’s all very civilized. But long ago, groups of sisters competed to capture groups of brothers, and the competition was chemical [...] among the Ina, the females competed. It’s like the way males have competed among humans. There was a time when a big, strong man might push other men aside and marry a lot of wives, pass on his genes to a lot of children” (109).

Thus, human gender expectations and their assumed correlation with biological sex are troubled in *Fledgling*. Not only do female Ina hold the power when it comes to mating and reproduction their female offspring are stronger than their male. “In that sense, the Ina are kind of a matriarchy” (109). On the surface this may seem to reinforce human gender dynamics. Human males are considered stronger in terms of physicality therefore like female Ina they utilize their strength to attract mates and pass on their DNA. However, in humans the perceived physical advantages of males are often translated into privilege for men and used as justification for gender-based violence. In *Fledgling* the physical strength of Ina females does not result in a sexist system that privileges them. Instead male and female Ina share the responsibilities of their community like serving on The Council of Judgement when crimes have been committed. The lack of sexism within the Ina species suggests that the supposed strength of a sex does not have to result in the unfair distribution of power in terms of gender roles.

Butler also queers gender norms and power dynamics in Shori's relationship with Wright. Appearances would suggest that as a white man Wright would hold more power than Shori the marginalized "other". Elizabeth Lundberg considers this alternative depiction of gender power dynamics in her essay "Let Me Bite You Again' Vampiric Agency in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*". Using BDSM as a lens Lundberg reads *Fledgling* as a commentary on agency and subjectivity. In a close reading of Wright's relationship with Shori Lundberg examines how Wright, white man, willingly gives up his power to Shori. However, she determines that Wright's surrender of his agency was not truly consensual because he did not have complete knowledge when he decided to do so. Which she argues is evidence that "consent is not given completely free of the context or constraint" (Lundberg 568). Therefore, Wright's desire to be with Shori does not mean his consent stems from an equal position of power. Lundberg acknowledges that marginalized people are the ones most frequently affected by this kind of unequal power dynamic. However, Wright's position above the basement in Crenshaw's metaphorical basement does not mean he has access to uninterrupted power and agency.

While *Fledgling* pays particular attention to consent when it comes to feeding this only appears to apply to symbionts. When Shori feeds from humans who are not her symbionts she often uses manipulation and in some cases force. Similarly, in *The Gilda Stories*, vampires are capable of reading minds and do not concern themselves with asking for permission as long as they leave something

in return. The vampiric creatures in both novels seem more concerned with ideas of reciprocity than they are with consent or choice. However, they do prioritize the agency of humans when it comes to turning someone or welcoming them as a symbiont, although, as discussed in Lundberg's piece, this choice is artificial and based in uneven power dynamics.

Lundberg also considers how sexual orientation is rejected as an identifying label in *Fledgling*. She states that "rather than represent queerness as abject or monstrous, *Fledgling*'s vampires challenge heteronormative family structures by completely naturalizing same-sex familial and sexual relationships and by making those relationships necessary" (573). The fluidity of sexuality and the lack of labels placed on individuals participating in same sex relationships, Lundberg contends, is indicative of agency and choice. Furthermore, she argues that the absence of labels also showcases how queerness is expected in the novel and necessary for belonging. Lundberg adds that the commonness of queerness in Ina communities, queers notions of family and kinship as well.

Fledgling and *The Gilda Stories* are also similar in the way that they queer familial structures. After Gilda escapes slavery she develops a new family for herself amongst the other vampires she meets. Following the death of her family Shori is left alone and eventually starts building a new family among her symbionts. One difference however is that Gilda has memories of her family that have been affected by time and trauma but Shori has no recollection of the family she lost. When Wright points out that all of Shori's wounds from the attack on her

family have healed her father replies “Except for not knowing herself or her people [...] I would call that a large scar” (72). Isoif’s commentary on Shori’s inability to remember her heritage being a large scar alludes to the pain that the descendants of slaves have endured resulting from the alienation from their roots. Furthermore, it is directly applicable to the haunting that Gilda faced as a result of her time as a slave.

Aside from drinking blood the vampiric characters in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling* both deviate substantially from the trope of traditional vampires. As discussed in the previous chapter the vampires of *The Gilda Stories* disidentify the monstrous label that is associated with the vampiric by focusing on the humanity and morals of the vampiric characters. In *Fledgling*, Butler transforms the mythological vampire into something new entirely. Although *Fledgling* is widely read as a vampire novel the characters within it are not humans that have returned from the dead and feed on blood to survive. Instead they are a separate species called Ina with their own culture and beliefs. However, the similarities between the Ina are not as miniscule as drinking human blood. When Shori awakens at the beginning of the novel with no recollection of who or what she is and feeds on Wright for the first time, he is convinced that she is a vampire. This leads Shori to do some research. In her first attempt she comes across articles that debunk the existence of vampires through explanations of diseases and that affect the skins sensitivity to the sun. Dissatisfied, Shori continues her research and finds,

“Many cultures seemed to have folklore about vampires of some kind or another [...] Not all vampires drank blood according to the book. Some ate flesh either from the living or from the dead. Some took in a kind of spiritual essence or energy – whatever that meant. All took something from their subjects, usually not caring how they injured the subject. Many killed their subjects. Many were dead themselves, but magically reanimated by blood, flesh, or the energy they took. One feeding usually meant the taking of one life. And that made no sense, at least for those who took blood. Who could need that much blood? Why kill a person who would willingly feed you again and again if you handled them carefully? No wonder vampires in folklore were feared, hated, and hunted” (37).

From the information that she gathers Shori seems unsure about whether she is a vampire or not. And she is particularly concerned with the lack of morality involved in how the mythological vampire feeds. She finds it hard to comprehend why a vampire would kill if it is unnecessary. She concludes that this immoral behavior is why vampires have often been the subject matter of horror. However, Shori is aware that she killed and fed on Hugh Tang, which leads her to wonder if she is as bad as the vampires of fiction after all. However, the shame that Shori feels about murdering Hugh Tang showcases her humanity and proves that she is not like the vampires she read about or the white slaveholders described by Morrison. Even without her memory or someone to guide her Shori comes to the

same conclusion as the vampires in *The Gilda Stories* that killing without a purpose is immoral.

When Shori is discovered by her father Isoif he clears up some of the confusion she has regarding her identity. He shares that they “have very little in common with the vampire creatures Bram Stoker described in *Dracula*, but [they] are long-lived blood drinkers” (63). He explains that while their kind has probably influenced some of the mythology of vampires, they are a separate species that goes by the name Ina. From Isoif’s explanation it appears that Ina are aware how they are perceived by humans. However rather than accept the label and its implications of monstrosity they choose to define themselves. Due to their preoccupation with reciprocity, fairness, and morality the vampiric creatures of *Fledgling* as well as *The Gilda Stories* challenge labels of the monstrous.

John Allen Stevenson tackles the vampire’s connection to perverse sexuality in his essay, “A Vampire in the Mirror: The Sexuality of *Dracula*”, and speculates that it is the vampires perverse performance of sexuality that makes it so horrifying. Stevenson separates his analysis of sexuality in *Dracula* from his predecessors by insisting it is not a fear of incest or simply exaggerated female sexuality that makes *Dracula*’s sexuality so horrific. Instead he suggests that the resulting “excessive exogamy” is what places *Dracula*’s sexuality outside the accepted realm of normativity. Stevenson cites anthropological theory which explains societal aversion to incest and how it arose out of biological necessity. In order to ensure genetic diversity and the continuation of the species humans

have to participate in exogamy, or “marrying out” (140). According to Stevenson however the vampiric figure exaggerates this accepted necessity to the point of horror.

In the introduction of my thesis I shared Marshall’s interpretation that *Dracula* is representative of fears surrounding the invasion of a racialized “other” into the pure and white space of the self. Stevenson follows this interpretation however he expands on it explaining that the sexualized feeding of Dracula performs on his victims results in them becoming the racialized other themselves. This too according to Stevenson is why *Dracula* cannot be about incestuous fear. When Dracula feeds on his victims they become vampiric like him. Since Dracula is responsible for the transformation, many read it as a birth, meaning Dracula’s victims are also his offspring and their sexual relationship would be incestuous. However, as Stevenson points out, once Dracula’s victims are transformed their sexual relationship ceases as he is no longer capable of feeding on them. Thus, Stevenson concludes that the real horror of *Dracula* lies in the fear that women will be lost to an “other”, not incest. Or, as Morrison explains in her work “the danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger” (chp.2). The real threat of the other then (or in this case the vampire), as Stevenson and Morrison point out, is that by associating with the “other” one runs the risk of becoming an outsider themselves.

This fear is also relevant to *The Gilda Stories*, because humans are also transformed into vampires through feeding. However, Stevenson’s observation

is complicated because transformations are no longer exclusive to women and women also engage in changing others. Thus, the horror of the vampire is no longer simply about the loss of women to an outsider. In fact, the transformation into the “other” is no longer depicted as a source of fear at all. With the exception of those who fail to comply with the ethical guidelines of vampire culture, all of the vampires in the novel are able to enter their new lives with minimal negative impact on the human world. In addition, while they are now “married out” to the “other” each vampiric character maintains a connection to the human world either through personal connections or political ones.

Stevenson’s assertions about excessive exogamy are seemingly less applicable to *Fledgling*. In *Dracula* and *The Gilda Stories* vampires are supernatural beings who can make humans vampiric through the exchange of blood. Ina, Butler’s interpretation of the vampire, on the other hand are simply a different species. So although they feed like the traditional vampire it does not transform the humans they feed on into Ina. Despite the lack of conversion the human symbionts in *Fledgling* arguably participate in a more drastic form of exogamy than the formerly human vampires in *The Gilda Stories*. Upon becoming symbionts humans lose their ability to live without their Ina and they also age at a slower rate. So, although some have children and form families within the confines of their Ina’s communities they have to reduce contact with or give up the families from which they came. Upon returning from a trip to visit her

family symbiont Brook remarks that she will not be able to do so much longer because they are starting to notice how slowly she is aging.

In *The Gilda Stories*, exogamy is not depicted as negative or something to be feared because all of the characters were already outsiders before they were changed. Thus, without strong emotional and societal connections they have little to lose in surrendering their humanness. This is not the case for the symbionts in *Fledgling* and it is not as easy for them to “marry out” and give up their allegiance to the human world. Yet doing so is not the fear inducing occurrence interpreted by Stevenson in *Dracula*. Like the vampire in *The Gilda Stores*, all of the symbionts Shori encounters seem content with the lives they have formed with their Ina despite the lives that they gave up obtaining them. This is another way that Gomez and Butler queer the archetype of the vampire and trouble perceptions of the monstrous and the human.

Butler and Gomez reimagine the archetype of the vampire in ways that make the reader consider what it means to be human. In her article, “Finding the Humanity in Horror: Black Women’s Identity in Fighting the Supernatural”, Kinitra Brooks considers how Black women writers like Tananarive Due and L.A Banks “rewrite and revamp history by focusing on black women’s bodies as sites of reality-changing power” (Brooks 2). She highlights how these authors invoke the figure of the vampire in their novels to “blur binaries that define western culture, natural/supernatural, normal/abnormal sexual desire, and masculine/feminine” (Brooks 3). Brooks identifies the vampire as the perfect supernatural creature to

challenge these binaries because they exist between identity markers like living/dead. She also notes, as Erik Marshall does in his work (discussed in the introduction), that the vampire myth has often been associated with racial otherness and thus are critical tools for exploring constructions of the racialized “other” in our world, given that it pivots on structures of racialization.

Brooks also considers how the vampire, which is typically associated with perverse female sexuality (Stevenson/Creed), is adapted by authors like Due and Banks as a means of reclaiming Black women’s agency over their own bodies (5). Furthermore, she analyzes how the characters constructed by Due and Banks render Black female sexuality visible despite the historical depictions that have painted them as either void of sexuality or exaggeratedly sexual and thus deserving of violence (8).

Gilda’s sexuality progresses throughout *The Gilda Stories* in a similar trajectory. The novel begins with the violent assault on Gilda and indicates the lack of dominion she possesses over her own body and sexuality. This scene is arguably more about power than it is about sex however it exemplifies the vulnerability of the Black feminine body and the desire to control it. As the novel progresses Gilda no longer faces the threat of sexual assault due to her increased strength as a vampire. More at ease she is able to embrace her sexuality. The intimacy that she shares with her partners throughout showcase the freedom that comes from owning her own body. However, the agency that Gilda has in terms of her body is only made possible through the vampire and the

genre of speculative fiction. If Gilda were human or if she existed outside of the realm of fantasy, there would be repercussions to her claiming her right to her body. Gomez rhetorically utilizes the archetype of the vampire to make us consider what could be made possible if Black women were allowed to own their sexuality without the threat of violence.

In *Fledgling*, Shori is allowed to freely express her sexuality. Her only hindrance comes from the human reaction to the ambiguity of her age. To human perception Shori is a child although in reality she is fifty-three years old. Due to her appearance and the descriptions of her as a child, readers may become uneasy by scenes of her engaging in sex with human adults. Although uncomfortable these scenes challenge the reader to consider our societal construction of age and sexual consent. I do not believe Butler is interested in whether the age of consent is too high or too low. Rather I think she wishes to draw our attention to the fact that age and how one should look at a certain age are societally constructed ideals that break down when applied to characters who defy normativity. Does Shori's appearance make her sexual relationships inappropriate? Or are they acceptable because by the human conception of time she is older than her sexual partners? I do not think it is necessary to answer these questions concretely. Instead readers should consider how these constructions manifest outside of the realm of fantasy. For instance, if we consider the language surrounding men who engage in sexual relationships with teenage girls. How often do we hear reference to the girl "looking" older or more

mature as a justification? Through her rhetorical reinterpretation of the vampire, Butler asks us to consider what would be made possible if women, regardless of age, were allowed to exist without the policing of how their bodies should or should not present sexually. Although Shori's appearance makes her sexual relationship with Wright and her other symbionts seem perverse there is no sexual act that takes place without her consent. Furthermore, Shori displays knowledge about what that consent entails. The question of Shori's age causes intentional discomfort in the reader however the control that she portrays over her own body dispels worry that she is being taken advantage of.

Although Shori's attempts to get closer to Blackness are reminiscent of Gilda's in *The Gilda Stories* they differ in what they seem to be implying about time and memory. For Gilda her memories of slavery and her inability to escape the past served as a barrier between her and the other Black characters. In contrast, Shori has no memories at all which makes it harder to connect with Black humans and Ina. Simultaneously her existence as the only Black Ina expands the possibilities of Blackness can be. While Gilda's predicament highlights the potential haunting nature of the past and the inevitability of history repeating itself, Shori's showcases how a lack of history can alienate one from their identity and culture. Despite their different approaches, both *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling* queer Blackness. As Shori and Gilda struggle to understand their relationships to Blackness they prove that it is not monolithic.

Another difference between Gilda and Shori is, Shori has access to the culture of her people in ways that Gilda does not. Shortly before he is murdered Isoif tries to give Shori some background on her family and Ina culture that she has forgotten due to her injury. Prior to being found by Isoif, Shori and Wright are under the impression that she is a vampire. Isoif informs them that although some vampire mythology may have stemmed from them, Ina are not vampires. He also shares that despite their genetic similarities to humans, Ina are their own species with their own traditions, folklore, and religions. One of those traditions is that male Ina and female Ina usually live in separate communities that they establish with their brothers or sisters and their symbionts. This familial structure deviates from the heteronormative expectation that mates should cohabitate together with their children.

Rather than basing their understanding of family on roles that need to be filled, the families in *Fledgling* are built based on reciprocity and mutual benefit. The relationship between an Ina and their symbionts is described as “mutualistic symbiosis”. In addition to blood human symbionts provide their Ina with physical and emotional connection. In return, human symbionts are rewarded with longer lives and healthier bodies. However, the connection is not solely beneficial because humans become dependent on the venom from their Ina’s bite and the loss of their Ina usually results in their death. This is why Shori chooses to take on the symbionts of her father and brother after their deaths. Although they do not die Ina are also affected by the loss of their symbionts. When Shori’s

symbiont, Theodora, is killed towards the end of the novel Shori is overtaken with grief and rage. As Shori begins to learn more about Ina culture she begins to understand her connection to her symbionts as that of a family. Which means her symbionts must have connections with each other as well. When Shori takes on Joel as a symbiont and triggers Wright's jealousy she warns them both that they should not "hurt the family" by fighting and is surprised when they move beyond ignoring each other and become friends.

In addition to suggesting that family can be based around the idea of mutual need, *Fledgling* queers the expectation that a two-person relationship is ideal or inevitable. Through her experiences Shori learns that while human symbionts often engage in sexual relationships with their Ina they are not prohibited from having romantic relationships or children and often symbionts develop relationships with other symbionts. When Shori wakes up confused at the beginning of the novel she kills and eats Hugh Tang, a symbiont of her brother Stefan. After Stefan dies in the attack on her father's community Shori takes on his symbiont Celia as her own. Although Celia needs Shori to survive she has a hard time accepting her because of what she did to Hugh Tang. When Celia shares with Shori why she finds it difficult to trust her she also reveals that she had romantic feelings for Hugh and that she was not the only one. Shori is initially confused by the arrangement until Celia explains that "the relationship among an Ina and several symbionts is about the closest thing I've seen to a workable group marriage" (127). The relationship that Celia shared with Stefan

and other symbionts challenges the heteronormative expectation of a two-person relationship. However as demonstrated by the relationships that Shori develops over the course of the novel their relationship model is common amongst the Ina and their symbionts.

While *Fledgling* and *The Gilda Stories* both queer family through the notion that family can be chosen, they differ in how they handle approach romantic relationships. *The Gilda Stories* highlights the shifting nature of relationships and that sexuality is fluid, however they do not challenge the heteronormative belief in a two-person relationship. While Gilda maintains a relationship with all of her past lovers, they always become platonic before she engages with another partner romantically. In *Fledgling* polyamory is the standard, with the expectation that several romantic relationships will happen concurrently. The Ina engage in sexual and romantic relationships with their symbionts that are non-exclusive primarily because they cannot result in offspring. However, polyamory is not solely treated as a means for procreation. For instance, Shori develops a romantic relationship with her first symbiont Wright early on and despite his jealousy she goes on to develop meaningful connections with her other symbionts and another Ina.

In the previous chapter on *The Gilda Stories* I discussed how Gomez rhetorically utilized genre to further her critiques of binary thinking and normativity. In article on Black woman writers in the realm of science fiction, Gregory Jerome Hampton and Wanda M. Brooks point out that the science

fiction, as a genre, has failed to center Black writers and characters despite the genre's common themes of alienation and "otherness." They argue that these themes share an "analogous link" with the Black experience and that authors like Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton translate these cultural experiences through their works of science fiction (70). They also assert that Butler and Hamilton's works are unique because they offer alternative ways of viewing identity and often "celebrate rather than distance the 'Other' "(72). In an analysis of Butler's science fiction work Hampton and Brooks point out the common themes that are present in her work and how characters in her work showcase "the importance of ambiguity in regard to race, gender, and human identity" (72).

Although *Fledgling* is not explicitly being discussed in Hampton and Brooks' article, their analysis of Butler's other works applies to the novel as well. For instance, their assertion that Butler's characters are ambiguous in terms of race gender, and human identity applies to the protagonist of *Fledgling*, Shori. As an Ina with human DNA Shori exists between the human and the nonhuman. Although she appears to be a sexually ambiguous human child, she is in fact a genetically modified female of another species. Shori's appearance works to prove how often our perceptions of identity can fail and thus the futility of labels based on those perceptions. The character of Gilda in *The Gilda Stories* does something similar. She complicates the meaning of humanity due to her vampiric nature and her presentation of gender does not conform with expectations of normativity. The rejection of binary labels that occurs within *Fledgling* and *The*

Gilda Stories as well as the disidentification with the monstrous are examples of the queer practices that Wallace identifies as indicative of alternative rhetoric.

Hampton and Brooks argue that the ability “to act as go betweens and bridges between human and non-human difference” as Shori and Gilda do “suggests a new way of thinking about the figure of a multiple-referenced identity”. They assert that these new ways of thinking depict ambiguity as a something positive and “allow us to question how and why we must be categorized as male, female, black, white, or other”. Hampton and Brooks conclude that science fiction is the tool that allows Butler to “open the imagination of readers to the construction of ‘otherness’ by painting the fantastic as the realistic”. This argument highlights the rhetorical choice made by both Gomez and Butler in their selection of speculative fiction as the vehicle for developing their theories about intersectional subjectivity. While other genres may have afforded them different avenues for exploring the themes taken up in their respective novels, speculative fiction allotted them the space to imagine a world different than the one we currently occupy.

Although there are differences in terms of argument and execution the similarities between *Fledgling* and *The Gilda Stories* goes beyond their similar protagonists. Both of these novels seek to queer, complicate, and disidentify labels that inefficiently describe those with intersectional identities.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The Gilda Stories and *Fledgling* both exemplify the ideals presented by Barbara Christian, Carole Boyce Davies, and other Black feminist scholars; that Black people have often relied on non-traditional forms like narrative to theorize. In their novels, Gomez and Butler utilize the genre of speculative fiction to challenge identity labels formed through whiteness and tackle varying relationships to human subjectivity. While speculative fiction may not be the expected genre for doing this kind of work, I argue that Gomez and Butler both selected the genre for its rhetorical capabilities.

Due to their similarities my thesis is not unique in putting these two novels into conversation. In a thesis project exploring the connections between *Fledgling* and *The Gilda Stories*, Shana Marie Williams argues that Butler and Gomez repurpose the vampire as a means of answering back to constructions of the racialized “other” as limited. While I agree with William’s assertion that these authors are answering back, I would assert that they are also rejecting and disidentifying the labels that mark them as monstrous. Furthermore, they are theorizing about what the possibilities could be if we stop viewing the “other” as less than and embrace that which places us on the margins.

I began this thesis with the Black feminist premise that people of color have often theorized through alternative forms like narratives. I conclude with the assertion that they do so intentionally and rhetorically. Narrative forms, in

particular speculative fiction; allows writers of color the space to share their unique perspectives, imagine worlds where their marginalization does not place them at a disadvantage, and provides them opportunities for critiquing their state of reality.

Jewelle Gomez and Octavia Butler take advantage of these opportunities. Through speculative fiction they are able to theorize about the complicated relationship to subjectivity shared by those with intersectionally marginalized identities. Furthermore, they are able to challenge the binary systems of thinking that are based in whiteness and leave no space for those whose identities mark them as “other”. Using the archetype of the vampire and the possibilities made possible through speculative fiction Gomez and Butler disidentify the monstrous label placed on those who exist outside of society’s accepted notions of normativity and encourage us to question what it means to be a subject and more broadly what it means to be human.

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