

Recovering and Engaging with Repressed Historical Traumas Through Speculative
Manipulations of Time and Space in *White Tears*, *Kindred*, and “The Man Who Ended History”

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Prospectus

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Fall 2024

Introduction

Speculative fiction is garnering increased interest within the field of literary scholarship due to the genre's ever-expanding range of adaptable, non-mimetic tools that authors can wield to defamiliarize naturalized social, historical, and political frameworks. While speculative stories necessarily depart from the real, they do so as a strategy of destabilization—estranging readers from the accepted hierarchies and axioms that underlie their social existence, not with the goal of providing temporary escape, but with the goal of engaging and challenging readers to recognize alternative possibilities.

The critical capacities of speculative storytelling are increasingly evident within contemporary, historical fiction subgenres that use non-mimetic manipulations of time and space to engage with repressed forms of individual and collective historical trauma. These speculative modes of revisiting unresolved historical traumas have emerged in a variety of forms, including, but not limited to, spectral hauntings, bodily displacements in time, and advanced technologies that enable virtual reality witnessing of past events. In this thesis, I will use three representative speculative texts to assess the value and viability of critically reconfiguring non-mimetic manipulations of time and space: *White Tears* by Hari Kunzru, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, and “The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary” by Ken Liu.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore how *White Tears* adapts haunting and possession tropes to forefront the lingering trauma and imposed objecthood Black musicians experienced while being denied compensation and attribution for the work, as well as the enduring legacy of a corrupt US prison system that targets and exploits Black men for free labor. David Hering and Heather Duncan note that Kunzru's spectral use of sound and the novel's repeated references to forms of racial violence that are inseparably linked to the slow yet

sustained human abuse of natural resources, are effective strategies for representing the lingering nature of trauma and exposing the afterlife of slavery. Published over four decades earlier, *Kindred* precedes *White Tears* in its speculative engagement with the afterlife of slavery and arguably lays the groundwork for more contemporary narratives like Kunzru's and Liu's, which prioritize experiences of history over distant, objective retellings. Accordingly, the second chapter of this thesis will reference critics like Marisa Parham and Anne Donadey, who note how, like Charlie Shaw in *White Tears*, Dana resists imposed objecthood even as her consciousness is split and body shifted across antebellum and contemporary time periods. She also gains a more contextualized understanding of her ancestors' survival tactics through these more visceral encounters with the racial trauma that haunts the history of the US as a nation and her own personal history. The third chapter will extend this analysis of trauma's haunting persistence and its emergence through speculative manipulations of time and space to "The Man Who Ended History." Meng Xia notes that Liu conjures forms of speculative witnessing, introduced within the narrative through advancements in quantum technology that enable virtual "time travel," to weigh the value of moral emotions when engaging with more sensuous knowledge of historical atrocities, committed at both individual and national levels.

Connecting these three seemingly disparate texts through their common use of speculative time and space manipulations will further illustrate the critical capacities of speculative fiction, especially the genre's various and nuanced possibilities for engaging with repressed historical traumas that remain overlooked or diminished through over-narrativization. In the following sections, I will chart a brief overview of common themes that will extend across each chapter in my thesis, including the critical capacities of speculative fiction and its subgenres, the speculative use of haunting and possession as figurative devices for engaging with

historical trauma, and assertions of selfhood and agency enabled through speculative revisions of dominant historical narratives.

Literature Review

Defining Speculative Fiction and its Critical Function

Arguing for the critical capacities of speculative subgenres requires a functional definition of the broader genre itself. Because speculative fiction does not adhere to a distinct set of characteristics as many preceding genres do, R.B. Gill proposes a general yet inclusive reference point: a text is considered speculative if it “present[s] modes of being that contrast with their audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (73). This tendency to destabilize an accepted reality is also identified by Mark Bould as he examines the evolution of speculative subgenres; he argues that speculative fiction unsettles “ontological certainty” and consequently disrupts readers’ understanding of the logic and rules that underlie everyday reality while prompting recognition of possibilities for alternative realities. Similarly, Marek Oziewicz emphasizes how speculative fiction denotes a continuum of non-mimetic genres that is constantly shifting and expanding; in this way, the blanket term “speculative” is a dynamic, “fuzzy set supercategory,” encompassing a growing number of science-fiction, horror, and fantasy variants and hybridizations. Thus, the speculative fiction genre paradoxically challenges the very notion of genre, as its evolving subject matter and versatility of form gives it the unique ability to evade restrictive modes of classification that often delimit other genres.

To understand how speculative fiction arrived at this general definition, Oziewicz traces a history of debates surrounding the genre’s essential qualities. He focuses in particular on the genre’s evolving relationship to established non-mimetic genres like science fiction. First introducing the term in 1941, author Robert A. Heinlein originally described speculative fiction

as sci-fi in its most refined form. Rather than forefronting advances in technology and science, he argued, speculative fiction merely incorporates them as narrative backdrops and instead focuses on exploring the human condition or how humans respond to scientific progress. However, this definition was considered exclusionist and elitist. Margaret Atwood later defined speculative fiction as opposite to, rather than a subset of, sci-fi. Sci-fi, she claimed, narrates events that cannot possibly happen, while the speculative contemplates futures that could potentially happen. However, this definition overlapped too closely with utopia fictions and was better suited to distinguish sci-fi from fantasy. Increasingly into the 21st century, speculative fiction has been characterized as the supercategory Oziewicz describes, encompassing a wide range of storytelling modes beyond traditional literature—including graphic novels, films, and video games among others—that have a distinctly “non-mimetic impulse” (6).

Understanding the evolution of the term “speculative fiction” and its implications is crucial to unpacking its current potential as an inclusive, flexible “field of cultural production” (Oziewicz 2) that draws non-hierarchical connections between a growing range of non-mimetic genres and creates opportunities to explore “the cognitive value of speculative visions of the world...from a postcolonial or minority perspective” (18). Because it emerged in a modern, multicultural context—further removed from the Western, colonial narratives of conquest and scientific progress that underpinned traditional non-mimetic genres like sci-fi and fantasy—speculative fiction gives authors from diverse ethnic backgrounds “a new discursive space” to share non-mimetic stories outside of the vague and, at times, homogenizing label of “ethnic literatures” (17-18). It also highlights how speculative fiction’s flexible and inclusive definition dissolves the need for traditional, oppositional, and competitive distinctions between non-mimetic genres. Rather than focusing on gaining status in the field of literary scholarship by

dissociating from the practices and themes of other non-mimetic genres in order to solidify a distinct identity, non-mimetic genres are increasingly colliding and overlapping in ways that contribute to the rise of a broader speculative fiction category.

Gill considers another useful schema for grouping speculative works beyond Oziewicz and Bould's hybridizations of pre-existing, non-mimetic genres. Speculative fiction, he argues, often advances implicit values and worldviews through the creation of alternative realities. Gill divides these values into two categories: "(1) categories of engagement or social critique and (2) categories of replacement or surrogate experience" (79). Speculative fiction that falls within the former category seeks to question and reform existing realities rather than escaping from them. While these two categories are not mutually exclusive, a speculative work may lie closer to one extreme than the other on a continuum of "engaged versus surrogate" (81). Speculative fiction that aims for engagement uses an unfamiliar restructuring of known reality to estrange audiences from naturalized power structures and invite them to recognize alternative possibilities. Because of its diverse, fluid subgenres and its reframing of sociohistorical realities through non-mimetic devices, speculative fiction also has the unique ability to experiment with non-mimetic manipulations of time in ways that are especially useful when engaging with obscured histories and repressed historical trauma.

The Figurative Role of Haunting and Possession in Relating Individual and Collective Traumatic Histories

Robert Eaglestone notes that contemporary historical fiction has taken a speculative turn in its use of haunting and possession to describe how the past impinges on the present. Instead of portraying historical events from a removed, "objective" point of view, these types of novels prioritize individual and collective experiences of "pastness" itself—experiences that are made

more tangible and immediate through speculative manipulations of time and space. He then discusses how memory is an inherently social concept, shaped by different levels of society, from families to nations, and that collective memory is constantly reinhabited and reenacted through tradition. Moreover, traumatic memories, whether they are repressed or ignored, can exist collectively, and fiction, without the constraints applied to traditional historical writing, can more easily resurface and bring the experiences of this trauma that are difficult to discuss, to readers' attention.

Kathleen Brogan further develops the role of haunting and its figurative use as a medium for transmitting traumatic pasts experienced by historically oppressed groups. Brogan notes how ghost stories no longer focus on the internalized, psychic disturbances of a "tortured individual" and instead centralize an ethnic group's collective struggle to productively reintegrate traumatic experiences, "such as the loss of land or homes, death of family members" or racial violence, into the present. In these stories, the ghost's persistent presence represents the intrusive repetition of traumatic memories that have remained unacknowledged. For Brogan, the successful reintegration of this traumatic memory is achieved when an individual from a haunted group allows an acknowledged, traumatic past to inform present actions and decisions in a way that does not overburden and overwhelm their present emotional state. When a haunted individual's memory fails to organize history in a productive way, this overly "intrusive recall" is represented by possession, a state of embodied memory that is destructive and unsustainable (155). However, Eaglestone contends that possession is in fact a more accurate figuration of a present individual or group's sustained relationship with the past. While haunting can be ignored, he argues, possession implies a more inseparable entanglement and fusion between past and present, one that cannot be relegated to the peripheral, as it resides within us and "seizes us in fragmented and

uncanny ways” (52). All three literary works explored in this project consider the figurative value of speculative manipulations of time and space, especially haunting and possession, when relating to traumatic pasts.

Among the three selected texts, the most straightforward application of haunting and possession narrative devices occurs in *White Tears*, which centralizes the spectral presence of a fictional blues musician named Charlie Shaw. Shaw haunts and eventually possesses Seth, a white, contemporary musician who, along with his friend Carter, participates in depoliticized and superficial listenership of blues music from the 1930s and samples tracks from forgotten records produced in this era without crediting the original artists. Duncan argues that while *White Tears* does not explicitly reference environmental concerns, analyzing it through the lens of eco-horror yields valuable insight on individual and collective racial trauma and its connection to human-induced environmental destruction. She first defines eco-horror as a genre in which “human characters are attacked by natural forces..that have been altered or angered by humans in some way” (343). Then, she explains how this definition complements the ontological nature of Charlie Shaw’s sonic ghost, a presence that oscillates between existence and non-existence, as well as the parallels between pollution, toxicity and the lingering nature of trauma – unresolved experiences which leave “physical traces, or residues, that poison the living present” (345). Through Kunzru’s detailed descriptions of landscapes ravaged by human abuse, waste, and corruption, he implies that “the violence of racism is inextricable from the country’s irresponsible exploitation of its natural resources” (346). As Seth is drawn towards landscapes devastated by neglect and exploitative practices, he traverses the same spaces that Shaw once inhabited and is forced to acknowledge Shaw’s traumatic experiences as a prison laborer.

Unlike Shaw's more embodied, spectral presence in *White Tears*, "The Man Who Ended History" uses a speculative figuration of virtual reality technology, based in quantum physics, to contemplate similar questions of how traumatic memory is constructed and transmitted, and how these memories are appropriated or obscured through narrativization and erasure. In the novella, a married couple creates a machine that harnesses traces of quantum particles from previous moments in time. These particles must be filtered through a witness's brain since it is the only processor sophisticated enough to sort and reconstruct the sensations accompanying these captured imprints of history. Through this immersive witnessing of the past, the couple wishes to give descendants access to forgotten atrocities their Chinese ancestors faced at the hands of Imperial Japan's Unit 731. Meng Xia argues that by introducing this form of speculative witnessing, Liu is able to mediate a debate about the value of empathy and the validity of personal experiences when investigating history, especially when virtual witnessing invites moral emotions like guilt, remorse, and sorrow in perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and future generations.

Like the destructive effects of Brogan's "intrusive recall," which is represented with a harmful escalation from haunting to possession, Liu illustrates how an excess of moral emotions can "possess" a witness, trapping them within an unproductive cycle of grief or antagonism. This risk is heightened when the witness carries "postmemory" of the atrocity, or "memory transmitted to the generation who claims the cultural or collective trauma after those who experienced it" (11). Postmemory does not entail a direct recollection of experiences but is inherited and emerges through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hersch, qtd. in Xia 11). However, virtual reality witnessing activates "prosthetic memory," which entails a more sensuous, immediate knowledge of a past traumatic event. Prosthetic memory can create a

crisis in witnesses if their postmemory contradicts what they observe or if this more direct contact with an ancestor's trauma evokes an unmanageable, affective response. Despite this risk of negative moral emotions overwhelming a witness, Liu implies that balancing moral emotions arising from configurations of prosthetic memory and postmemory with more removed, objective retellings of history is the best path forward. A balanced approach to empathic witnessing of historical traumas can therefore initiate a "shared connection with a traumatized victim" and in turn produce "empathy, social responsibility, and political alliances" (11)

In *Kindred*, Dana gains prosthetic memory of her ancestors' trauma through her visceral, and unpredictable spatio-temporal shifts between antebellum Maryland and 20th century LA. While Liu's novella uses virtual reality technology as the speculative catalyst for a more immersive witnessing of the past, the cause of Dana's oscillations in time is never clearly explained, and during these trips, she becomes not only a witness but an active participant in her ancestors' history and its complicated, painful entanglements with the legacy of slavery. Marisa Parham argues that Dana's ability to interact with, rather than merely observe, the social landscape of her ancestors' past and ensure the course of her own personal history, is an example of how Butler uses time travel to forefront "history's actualities—flesh, survival, and the things people do in the interest of the future" (1321). Thus, Dana's "haunting experience of the past as present" (1320) helps contextualize the means of survival and resistance available to her ancestors—efforts which secured her own existence in the present.

Because Dana carries postmemory of the trauma Black women like her ancestor Alice experienced at the hands of white overseers—a naturalized system of sexual violence tied into the economy of slavery and Dana's own lineage—Parham points to Dana's body as a text that enables her and husband's more visceral encounters with the past. This is reinforced by the plot point

that only through touching Dana, is Kevin pulled into the vortex of her ancestors' history. By experiencing this incarnated history, Dana is forced to "continually encounter the limits of [the archival knowledge] she [previously] constructed through consumption of cultural products" including films, literature, and historical narratives. Thus, Butler uses speculative manipulations of time to exteriorize present day readers' internal struggle to identify with past individuals', especially enslaved individuals', traumatic experiences—experiences that are inaccessible yet still haunt and exert influence on the present.

Assertions of Selfhood and Agency Through Revised Historical Narratives

David Hering focuses on the symbolic significance of Kunzru's decision to use Charlie Shaw's impossible record as the vessel or gateway to his haunting and possession of Seth in *White Tears*. Trapped inside the record, Shaw is commodified, representing "a broader concept of blackness as both object and non-existence" (148). Not only does this objectification apply to the afterlife of slavery and intersecting systems of social and economic oppression along racial lines, but also more specifically, the exploitation of Black artists, their work stolen and imitated without compensation or attribution. This is especially true of Carter and other white collectors during the Blues Revival movement who treated Black artists as disembodied voices rather than autonomous individuals, fetishizing the "authentic" suffering they perceived in the voice and style of such music. Hering argues that Shaw, through his possession of Seth, is eventually able to reclaim the autonomy and agency he was previously denied. Thus, as a ghost, Shaw is not inherently insubstantial or without selfhood, but has been forcibly "sealed into that crushing objecthood," (150) recalling DuBois' sense of double consciousness, where a lack of personhood or fearful characteristics are imposed by an outside other. Because of the record, music becomes

a “time machine” within the narrative, linking the past to the present and drawing an analogy between the “persistence of sound” and “the endurance of the afterlives of slavery” (154).

The theme of claiming selfhood in response to imposed objectification is especially relevant in *Kindred* – a predecessor to *White Tears* that contemplates the afterlife of slavery as continued and felt through its protagonist’s very body as opposed to sound. While Shaw’s ghost resists objectification and reasserts agency through haunting and possession, Dana does so by maintaining narrative control and use of “I” throughout the story, even as she is shifted back and forth in time and faced with impossible choices that force her to become implicated within a traumatic legacy of violence against enslaved women. Anne Donadey notes how the novel’s first person narrative perspective gives insight into Dana’s private thoughts, an interior space made accessible to readers, where she unequivocally undermines the dehumanizing language imposed on her, again invoking the double consciousness that empowered Shaw to resist his own “ghosting” from depoliticized music listenership (70-71). Unlike Shaw, who eventually inhabits Seth and uses the privileges attached to his skin to exact revenge on the Wallace family, Dana’s existence in antebellum Maryland is not rendered invulnerable to the risk of violence. The speculative element of the novel facilitates her shifts in time but does not follow her once she arrives at her temporal destination. As Parham similarly notes, Dana’s inability to willfully control her own mode of time travel (which only activates when she feels her life is in danger) necessarily contextualizes the survival tactics her ancestors were limited to, approaching historical representation in a way that “neither [denies] oppressed women’s agency entirely nor...overestimate[s] their [means of] resistance” (Donadey 76).

Statement of Purpose

Comprehensive surveys of the speculative fiction genre have explored its broader critical possibilities, especially those arising from the genre's non-mimetic reimaginings of "ordinary" reality and its destabilizing tendencies. As noted by Bould, Gill, and Oziewicz, speculative fiction genres are valuable sites for cultural production and critique, especially for authors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, less detailed scholarship exists on the critical potential of more narrowly defined speculative subgenres, and even fewer sources offer comparative analyses of the varied and nuanced insights texts within these different subgenres can produce, depending on the types of non-mimetic devices they employ. While this thesis does not assess all possible critical applications of speculative manipulations of time and space, it does offer a thorough examination of three texts that effectively adapt these non-mimetic devices to excavate the haunting, visceral nature of historical trauma from racial violence and wartime atrocities, both at the individual and collective level. Through comparative analyses of these texts, I intend to demonstrate the value of speculative fiction as a critical lens for productively engaging with repressed historical traumas in ways that prioritize personal experiences of history, generate empathy, and promote more nuanced and informed understandings of how to move forward even as the weight of past systems of oppression and individual acts of violence are inextricably entwined with the present.

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