

Racial Reassignment Surgery and the Dissolution of the Color Line: Afrofuturist Satire in George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Jess Row's *Your Face in Mine*

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Abstract: Racial passing, during the antebellum period, was a way in which African-American peoples sought to escape the throes of slavery and the physical and psychological abuse associated with the plantation tradition. In time, racial passing became a way of obtaining the social, economic, and political opportunities denied people of color in the discriminatory and racially-biased United States. This study, however, examines a specific form of racial passing--that of racial reassignment surgery--as explored in George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Jess Row's *Your Face in Mine* as a way to test the theory that assimilation and miscegenation would one day resolve the color line that had left generations of African-American peoples disenfranchised and dispossessed. At the same time, this study examines the Afrofuturist sensibilities in these two key works of the Harlem Renaissance era and present day to understand how such authors not only counter the troubling histories of their time but also propose counter-futures that would otherwise have been buried beneath the cultural oppression of Jim Crow and other more modern forms of racism.

Keywords: counter-futures; Jim Crow; racial passing; racial reassignment surgery; satire

In his 1966 autobiographical work, George S. Schuyler—one of the most influential and yet controversial authors of the Harlem Renaissance era—notes that “[a] black person learns very early that his color is a disadvantage in a world of white folk” (1). Because of the spread of Jim Crow cultural oppression across the United States and the infiltration of racist stereotypes in the U.S. cultural imagination, life for the African-American community was far from easy, as black codes and other social strictures were “designed” and implemented in an effort “to constrict the opportunities of all African Americans and to secure a political and economic order that depended upon the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of large parts of the southern population as a whole” (Dailey xv). For the African-American people, the results of this systematic oppression were clear: restricted to menial roles as the second-class citizens of a growing society and denied equal access to educational opportunities and resources comparable to those made available to whites, they were ultimately trapped in a social and economic system that left little room for them to climb. In other words, there was a clear glass ceiling hanging dangerously overhead and though the African-American people held hope of ushering in a new dawn and obtaining the liberty as well as equality long denied them, an earth-shattering societal transformation would be required to break the chains of this new kind of enslavement (economic or otherwise) that the community at large had to face.

Racial passing—a source of contention and controversy across the United States—was then one option for escaping the restrictions placed upon them for those African-American peoples of light enough complexion to pass for white and gain access to the social, political, and/or economic opportunities traditionally denied them. Dating back to the antebellum period, racial passing was a tool employed by individuals such as Ellen Craft to escape the throes of slavery through the act of performing whiteness—an act that requires more than just the appearance of white skin but also “a nuanced understanding of southern social and gender norms,” those crucial intersections of “race and class” (Hobbs 46). Post-Emancipation, the goals of racial passing morphed. No longer focused on just obtaining freedom from enslavement, those who decided to pass were generally

interested in access to what Cheryl I. Harris terms “whiteness as property” (1714)—the opportunities and securities of white skin as a signifier of power in a society where Blackness was targeted for discrimination and further abuse.

These experiences, however, did not just provide insight into the Jim Crow culture and the sacrifices Black men and women often had to make in electing to pass. As Hee-Jung Serenity Joo notes, such narratives “reveal the constructed and fragile nature of racial categories” and the potential to fundamentally alter “the hypocritical and discriminatory system of US democracy that [erroneously] equated white skin with freedom and citizenship” (171). This in large part is the function of racial passing in fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—texts such as *Flight* by Walter White or *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson that call attention to the prevalence of racial indeterminacy in the United States as a way of decoupling whiteness from power/freedom and Blackness from disempowerment/oppression. By illustrating the ways in which this strict racial order has already begun to collapse and the strategies employed to reposition oneself on either side of the color line, these works highlight race as a social construct, a temporal fixture in a constantly evolving society. At the same time, they offer a necessary look into “[t]he broader processes of race-making in the United States” and “demonstrate that the concept of race can be specious but also utterly real” (Hobbs 8).

In his 1931 satirical novel, *Black No More*, Schuyler explores this paradigm, specifically employing the crucible of fiction to test the theory, long held by some among the educated class, that “the color line will be dissolved eventually by the light-skinned Negroids ‘passing white,’ by miscegenation and final assimilation by the white group” (McKay 351). In the novel, his focus is less on racial intermarriage and more on the kinds of cultural and ideological miscegenation that can occur when the color line finally collapses (knowingly or not). Here, Schuyler paints a world where technological production enables African Americans to modify the color of their skin and, along with it, elevate their status as members of a dejected race—those seen by some as the dregs of American society. In the process, this “mock race novel aimed like a precision-guided weapon at the central features of popular 1920s race mythology informing the perspectives of whites and blacks alike. In hitting his target, Schuyler not only challenged racial perspectives in his time, he also struck hard at many perennial themes of American racial consciousness” (Ferguson 213). And yet, Schuyler was not the only one to pursue this critique. Jess Row in his 2014 novel, *Your Face in Mine* also focuses on the future possibility of racial passing through racial reassignment surgery, though in this case, he is focused on the transformation his character endures from white to Black.

By examining these two novels in conversation, we can reach a better understanding of how authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries both use racial reassignment to interrogate the possibility of conquering the racial divide as we look toward a potentially post-racial society. At the same time, this study will enable us to interrogate the long-lasting implications of these two novels on a future slowly becoming our present reality—Afrofuturism as a guide to negotiating racial identity conflicts today.

“Get Out, Get White or Get Along”: Addressing the Race Problem through the Afrofuturist Sensibilities in George Schuyler’s *Black No More*

In his 2003 article, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun declares that Afrofuturism is “a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century [that is] hostile to Afro-diasporic projection” (301). As a literary and cultural lens, Afrofuturism, as Eshun suggests, works to challenge the marginalization of a peoples once maligned as inferior or primitive while reclaiming the counter-futures that they envisioned for peoples across the diaspora that may otherwise have been disrupted by the cycle of discrimination and cultural oppression at

work. At the same time, as Adriano Elia acknowledges in “The Languages of Afrofuturism,” this movement “and its political agenda are aimed at an epistemology rewriting the history of the past and imagining a positive future for people of African descent” (84). The two foci are absolutely essential in Afrofuturist works, like Schuyler’s, because the skewed record of History often fails to acknowledge the multiplicity of histories within a given moment in time while “overlook[ing] the contemporary demographic, political, social, and economic processes that prop up this ethnic boundary, reconstructing it, and producing tension along its borders and within the two bounded ethnic groups” (Nagel 5) that inherently influence which futures we see as viable and which futures are simply ignored. If these thinkers are thus correct that Afrofuturist visions entail simultaneously rewriting, reconstructing, and reimagining, then this can become the lens by which we approach Afrofuturist texts, transcending the present—which some regard as a fiction—in order to examine such critical ideas outside of the boundaries of time and space.

A Afrofuturist in its inquiry, *Black No More* by George Schuyler, then, envisions a world in which Black peoples can alter the color of their skin in just days and, in the process, presumably escape the harrowing experience of Jim Crow. From the early pages of the novel, the narrator calls attention to the possibilities for protagonist Max Disher (later Matthew Fisher, post-reassignment): “No more jim crow. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last” (Schuyler, *BNM* 8). In these words, the narrator reveals the ways in which color has become a kind of enslavement for members of the African-American community, relegating its people to a fundamentally second-class status and leaving them dispossessed, stripped of any opportunity at achieving the power and property associated with white skin. But by electing to undergo the racial reassignment procedure, to pass for white in a society in which whiteness holds a privileged position, Disher imagines for himself and for the larger Black community a raceless future after centuries struggling for recognition of their legitimacy. Science and technology, as consistent with Afrofuturist works, then become the gateway for radical societal transformation. As Elia declares, “[T]he futuristic and supernatural elements...show a new way to deal with old issues” like those of the racial divide (94).

This vision of a raceless or post-racial future is also shared by Dr. Junius Crookman, the inventor of this groundbreaking technology. Eager to address what he considered maybe “the most annoying problem in American life,” he believed that “if there were no Negroes, Americans could concentrate their attention on something constructive. Through his efforts and the activities of Black-No-More, Incorporated, it would be possible to do what agitation, education and legislation had failed to do” (Schuyler, *BNM* 34): to eradicate the color line and the culture of racism that was so deeply engrained in the United States. Though his ideas are somewhat naïve in that they do not demonstrate a thorough understanding of how deep the racial divide was across the United States, his intentions are described as pure, for Crookman, the quintessential race man, “prided himself above all on being a great lover of his race” and was determined “to remove all obstacles in” the path of the African-American people, even if that meant “depriving them of their racial characteristics” (Ibid). Like Schuyler himself uses the novel to test the theory that the eradication of color will yield a more equal, more democratic society, Crookman, too, advances this endeavor, developing new technologies to rewrite past histories where “superficial, innocuous qualities [had] distinguished Caucasians from black Americans” and to instead offer a worldview in which all “Americans whether black or white are simply Americans” (Thaggert 91).

The notion of invisibility or transparency is therefore vital to the Afrofuturist themes that the novel explores. As David DeJuliis and Jeff Lohr note in their essay, “Rewriting the Narrative: Communicology and the Speculative Discourse of Afrofuturism,” invisibility is a central feature

of the Black experience. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a quintessential example of this, for the protagonist's "invisibility," they claim, necessarily "results from a 'phenomenological slippage' (Yancey 2008, 76) between being black and cultural perceptions of the black body, from being not only invisible, but also divisible and dispossessed from the rational discourse of a 'whitewashed' society (Yaszek 2005, 297)" (DeJuliis and Lohr 169). As DeJuliis and Lohr suggest, the state of invisibility is a direct consequence of the negative stigmatization of Blackness and the histories of race, particularly in the United States where the minstrel tradition, Jim Crow cultural aggression, and the later counter-initiative to the Civil Rights Movement all worked to cast African-American peoples as contemptible, inferior, and at times even dangerous beings. What we see here is a clear reminder that "the body is a site of contested meanings" (Yancy xxii)—those both internal and external to the body itself. And when those meanings do not align, a kind of invisibility emerges, the individual not seen nor heard in society, the kind of political experience that long dictated the way that African-American peoples maneuvered through American life.

The procedure developed by Dr. Junius Crookman in the novel is, then, a tool to open up once denied opportunities by breaking down the color line for Blacks and giving them access to the hypervisibility of whiteness as well as the power that accompanies finally being seen. In the text, Fisher, for instance, assumes a leadership position within the Knights of Nordica—a satirized version of the Ku Klux Klan—the ultimate position of power amidst the ensuing chaos once the color line dissipates but not the negative stigma and fears of race. As Miriam Thaggert notes in *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance*, for Schuyler, the notion of racial difference was a disreality. As he believed, "the mixture of races and cultures in the United States makes the boundaries between racial categories indistinct" (Thaggert 91)—a fact made all the more apparent with the disappearance of the Black body in the text. Here science and technology become the key to the racial erasure witnessed in *Black No More* and with it the removal of the obstacle of color that rendered the African-American community at large invisible, despite its growing population in the world. That hypervisibility is then accentuated by the supra-whiteness that those who have transitioned adopt.

In using the crucible of fiction to redress the factors that perpetuated the color line across the United States, Schuyler recognized that the stigmatization of color was only part of the problem that needed to be addressed and therefore he worked to highlight the other contributing factors like the race-based institutions that feed off of racial conflict to exist. Thaggert acknowledges this as well, declaring, "Schuyler's strategy for contending with the question of black representation was to exaggerate, to parody any and all groups that sought to exploit race for any motive" (91), including organizations such as the NAACP and the Ku Klux Klan. As the African-American masses flock to the sanitariums to undergo the Black-No-More procedure, Schuyler describes the ensuing chaos that emerges, for example, in Black society and the institutions that depended upon racial paranoia and the racial divide to persist. He writes that "Santop Licorice, head of the once-flourishing Back-To-Africa Society, was daily raising his stentorian voice in denunciation of the race for deserting his organization" (Schuyler, *BNM* 62), just as he critiques "Negro politicians in the various Black Belts, [who had] grown fat and sleek 'protecting' vice with the aid of Negro votes which they were able to control by virtue of housing segregation" (Ibid), and the National Social Equity League that "had for forty years carried on the fight for full social equality" (63) but "were never so happy and excited as when a Negro was barred from a theater or fried to a crisp" (64).

What we see in the passages above is evidence of a kind of racial capitalism at work that proved inherently counterproductive to the uplift agenda and the push for social equality for the African-American people in a highly prejudicial society. Profiting off of the hardship the Black

community had to endure under the Jim Crow system, organizations like the NAACP—satirized as the Negro Social Equity League above—cheered, Schuyler argues, acts of discrimination and racial violence because they enabled the color line and, by nature, their organizations to persist. In essence, these organizations were just another “racket,” like the numbers pool, popular during the Harlem Renaissance era and beyond—a money-making scheme that further exploited the exploited and dispossessed, hence the metaphor of crabs in a barrel often attributed to the Black community. Therefore, while on the one hand, the “novel speaks to fantasies and anxieties about increasing urban industrialization, racial assimilation, and the reproduction of raced bodies in the black modernist moment” (Retman 1449), on the other, it also speaks to the ways in which social organizations pretending to support African-American equality and the opportunity at happiness—denied them as a result of the pervasive nature of the U.S. color line—capitalized on the color line itself to line their pockets and accumulate wealth, corrupted like the all-consuming U.S. capitalist system.

Though the emergence of new technologies potentially promises to increase equality and to eradicate the race question (what Schuyler elsewhere describes as the Caucasian problem), like with many modern technologies, the results are different than anticipated. Given the deep-seated nature of racism and “the complexities of the color line” as it exists and has existed historically across the United States, “Black-No-More, Inc. only thrusts the entire nation into [further] chaos and racial paranoia by making it impossible to distinguish ‘real’ whites from former African Americans who have ‘become’ white via the machine” (Joo 171). At the same time, there is an immense backlash from members of the white community who see the invention as an invasion of their property—that territory (social, economic, and political power) from which they had long excluded Blacks in an effort to maintain the racial hierarchy. In this sense, *Black No More* lives out the fantasy of D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which saw Black senators of the post-Emancipation South immediately pass pro-miscegenation legislation and radically uproot society. Just like in response to the film, the success of Dr. Crookman’s invention sparks a rise in membership in the satirized KKK. In both instances, the color line struggles to reinforce itself, supported by the champions of racial division and Jim Crow, who perceive Blackness as an inferior and contemptible thing. The chaos is a sign of the fundamental destabilization of society as they knew it and the mass hysteria, among whites and Blacks alike, is emblematic of their inability to adjust.

How, then, does Schuyler adhere to the tenet that Afrofuturist works should push to depict a more positive future for Blacks—that counter-future too often masked due to the ramifications of racism, discrimination, and cultural oppression? In truth, George Schuyler long contended that “[c]ontrary to the pundits on the Negro (or Caucasian!) problem who bewail the American racial facts of life, most of the colored brethren do not go about perpetually enveloped in gloom and despair” (*BaC* 1), just as he argues within the novel that there are no fundamental differences that distinguish whites from Blacks in U.S. society—realities that his core characters, white and Black alike, come to realize at the end of the text. Here Schuyler finally depicts the disappearance of the color line—at least for the characters of Matthew Fisher, the former Imperial Grand Wizard, and Fisher’s wife—critiquing the novel’s past as artificial (in its misbelief about totally eradicating the race problem) in clear contradiction to the closing image of Blacks and whites, Klansmen and their mixed race grandchild smiling on the beaches of Cannes.

In *Black No More*, the positive future that Schuyler envisions is not as widespread as the chaos that ensues after Crookman’s invention begins to radically change the U.S. racial landscape. At the end of the novel, the racial and socioeconomic hierarchy is restored, evident when Schuyler writes, “What was the world coming to, if the blacks were whiter than the whites? Many people in

the upper class began to look askance at their very pale complexions. If it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of the possession of Negro blood, of having once been a member of a pariah class, then surely it were well not to be so white!” (*BNM* 178). Thus, it seems that, at least for the most part, the past and future coincide. But this is not in fact the case, for the central characters of the novel and their understandings of race are inherently transformed. Although the masses are virtually unaffected, what this likely means is that those individuals live in a different history—a point that only reaffirms the importance of recognizing a multiplicity of histories in Afrofuturist works, for the experiences that Matthew Fisher has would undoubtedly have been lost in the dominant History of those events.

“I Felt Part of the Human World”: White-to-Black Racial Reassignment and the “Afro-Diasporic Projection” of Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine*

Though fundamentally similar in their fictional approach and engagement with the concept of racial reassignment surgery, Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine* operates with a different vision than we see in *Black No More*, not only because it is a white-authored text but also because it aims to disrupt what Row terms, “white dreamtime”—that psychosocial space for whites “where there are no blacks, ... [a fantasy in which] they don’t see themselves occupying a certain racial position or identity” (Schulman 46). In the world that Row creates, technological advancement has enabled individuals to select their preferred racial identity, challenging the myth of race as biologically determined and highlighting the reality that race is a social construct determined by how individual people have been taught to read race in the world. Here technology is not the means by which the constraints of racism are erased and through which the once pervasive color line disappears, as Schuyler explores; rather, it becomes the tool by which whiteness, Blackness, and other racial identities intersect so that 1) those with a kind of racial dysphoria can carve out a space for themselves in the world and in a body that matches how they see their true and ideal selves and 2) a new level of cultural understanding across the races can be achieved.

To integrate these ideas into his work, Row centers his novel on the once white and Jewish character of Martin, who has undergone racial reassignment surgery to pass as African American¹ and is determined to bring this technology on a broader scale to the rest of the world. From the very beginning of the text, the narrator acknowledges the overarching stigma associated with racial reassignment with references to the history “on passing, on Michael Jackson, on Jewish nose jobs, on eyelid surgery in Korea—more or less what one would expect”—all actions that have resulted in “outcry; ... public discussion” (Row 25). Continuing, the narrator now characterizes his old friend Martin as “a little unhinged, maybe. Mildly delusional. Or living in some alternate universe,

¹ Row’s *Your Face in Mine* immediately draws parallels to John Howard Griffin’s text *Black Like Me*—a non-fiction text detailing Griffin’s journey to the Jim Crow South to explore the tense racial climate and discrimination against the African-American community. Griffin’s transformation, in contrast, is temporary, having taken medication and resting beneath sun lamps to alter the color of his skin. Passing here becomes much more of “an unconscious journey to self-knowledge, a way of discovering the meanings of his own white racial identity and his own implication in the system of oppression he sets out to expose” (Ginsberg 9). This is far different from what Row attempts with *Your Face in Mine*, not only because the transformation that Martin undergoes is permanent but also because he sees himself as Black. An analysis of intersections between these two works and Grace Halsell’s *Soul Sister*—the story of a white woman who altered the color of her skin to explore Black America—would yield invaluable insight into the ways in which white authors have conceptualized racial passing and the future of race, especially since passing has historically been a phenomenon explored primarily in Black-authored texts.

aesthetically, intellectually. It's a great question mark" (25-26). Together, these statements not only reveal the negative perception of racial reassignment and the culture of passing in a global context but the difficulty of advancing this technology on a grander stage. To bring about the vision that Martin has of a world in which people can overcome their racial dysmorphia—a central issue he sees as a source of personal and public tension in the twenty-first century—he would have to go about reversing the stigma, of redefining deep-seated notions about race, of proposing “some alternate universe, aesthetically, intellectually” (Ibid) that others could embrace.

For Martin, whiteness does not necessarily hold a negative connection but is rather linked with a kind of invisibility similar to that that Max Disher feels as a Black man in Schuyler's *Black No More*. Here Row writes, “I wasn't a curiosity. I was a non-entity. I was invisible” (111)—a feeling only erased when he enters an alternate Black world two or three times a week for dinner at a friend's home. There, he declares, “It wasn't just that I was happy. It was that I felt human, as if for the first time...I felt part of the human world. And when Willie told me it was okay, because I would turn black one day, too, I wanted to believe him. Part of me did” (114). Unlike in *Black No More*, where whiteness is property, in *Your Face in Mine*, Blackness is a cherished physical and psychosocial space for the protagonist who feels a kind of dehumanization or lack of humanity as a white Jewish boy. Still, in this context, “[t]he idea of White-to-Black passing seems [rather] paradoxical—even oxymoronic—given the current disparities, challenges, and crises that vex Black lives daily” (Broady, Todd, and Darity 3). But what Row is doing, as Elia calls for, is the “rewriting [of] the history of the past” (84) in order to highlight the untold stories and voices, thus calling attention to the joyous parts of the African-American cultural experience hidden too often beneath tales of oppression and despair.

Broady, Todd, and Darity—in exploring the phenomenon of White-to-Black passing from a historical perspective—offer a valuable framework, that of fictive kinship, for understanding how the act of repositioning oneself along racial lines operates in the world. As they describe it, “[f]ictive kinship refers to connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationships which serve as integral components of cultural networks” (3). While this dynamic often occurs intraracially, it also occurs when one engages in the act of racial passing. To explore this idea, the authors use the example of Rachel Dolezal, who controversially used makeup and hair extensions in an effort to alter her physical appearance and pass as a member of the African-American community (12). During her life, Dolezal was accused of not only cultural appropriation but also “replac[ing] gaps in her life story with self-constructed memories of a Black life, family, and upbringing” (12), all of which were exposed in 2015 when her parents outed her as white.²

This notion of fictive kinship is directly applicable to *Your Face in Mine* and is therefore a means of probing the art of race-making in the protagonist's life. On the hand, it manifests in the relationship that Martin forges with the character of Willie—two friends of different races whose socioeconomic experiences are parallel, enabling them to form a fictive kinship during Martin's formative years that inherently shapes his perception of race. On the other hand, like with Dolezal,

² Since then, Dolezal has had a number of media appearances, legally changed her name to Nkechi Amare Diallo, and also published a memoir—*In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*—that explores how she came to identify as Black. These acts, all part of Dolezal's attempts at race-making, can be described as a kind of commodification of Blackness. Though this falls outside of the scope of the immediate study, there are direct parallels to Martin's experience in *Your Face in Mine*, as he intends to go public about his racial transformation in order to better sell this new technology and increase access to racial reassignment for people across the globe.

the decision to cross racial lines entails the development of a new history and, by nature, the erasure of at least part of Martin's immediate past. As Row writes, "I returned to the United States with an altered passport and have since presented myself as the child of adoptive white parents, now dead, with no information about my biological roots. This is the story that everyone around me—my wife, my intimate friends, my pastor—takes at face value" (41). In constructing this new identity for himself, Martin Wilkinson simultaneously engages in erasure of his past, enabling Row to "explore the ways people try to escape their racial identities" and to "investigate their desire for racial reconciliation," even if that reconciliation is not with the world but within the self (Lee 2). What Row highlights here through the character of Martin is the malleability of racial identity and the processes by which racial integration occurs—something less developed in Schuyler's text.

Like *Black No More, Your Face in Mine* attempts to expand beyond an individual story of racial passing to a sociopolitical critique, addressing the racial divide in the United States and across the globe and the potentialities for bridging that divide. As Felicia R. Lee asserts in a 2014 review of the book, "If a dramatic fix is needed to bring people together or to help them with their racial demons, then Martin may be on to something" (2). Because the color line has contributed to the fracturing of society and the isolation of communities racially and ideologically, this is the fictive present that Afrofuturist works ultimately attempt to correct. By having Martin undergo the racial reassignment surgery and encourage the spread of such technologies to allow others to do the same, Row envisions a future in which race is no longer simply a prescribed identity—static and limiting—but rather a choice, an ascribed identity (at least for those with the money to absorb the costs). Racial reassignment then opens the possibility for a more widespread integration—ideological miscegenation through the fusion of cultural horizons—of "the most radical kind," "the kind you can't undo" (qtd in Lee 2).

This final detail is of the utmost importance to *Your Face in Mine* because the difficult task of integration and healing the racial fractures of society has often been undone through an active campaign to restore the racial order and disinvestment in the initiatives that have resulted in some progress toward long-standing change. Jim Crow is a clear example, undoing the work of the Reconstruction era and restoring the racial hierarchy to keep Blacks in their "place." In the novel, the permanence of this change—in contradistinction, for example, to the temporary transformation with makeup and heating lamps we see in John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*—is therefore paramount in ensuring a future that does not revert back to its past racist tendencies and the kinds of cultural divisiveness that only further fractures a society already fractured both politically and socioeconomically. Dr. Silpasuvan, the inventor of the novel's racial reassignment procedures, outlines the logic behind this, declaring, "[F]rom a practical point of view, as the world becomes more and more interrelated and natural and geographical barriers less substantial, the desire for these procedures will doubtless become more and more acute in the next century" (Row 265); this, the counter-future that Row envisages throughout the text, is perhaps the most important step toward a new global perspective that necessarily decentralizes the political emphasis on race.

In Afrofuturist works, "[B]lack artistic truth reveals essentially a failure in the underlying structures of white Western civilization and a proposal to set right those destructive social and political forces in nature," argues Gilbert Muller (qtd in Tal 67). To some extent, this is reflected in *Your Face in Mine* in the actions that Martin takes to rectify the societal disunity that has caused such harm to communities of color nationwide. In advocating the further development of racial reassignment technologies as a tool through which to increase unity and cultural understanding, he offers that clear near-future or counter-future proposal for the redevelopment of society as a means of "set[ting] right those destructive social and political forces" (Ibid). This is perhaps the

allure of fiction in tackling issues of race, culture, politics, and identity, for it ultimately enables the author “to intervene in the readers’ assumptions by creating a world in which standards are different” (Nelson 101)—something unachievable in mimetic fiction so deeply concerned with the past and how it shaped the present day. As Nalo Hopkinson notes in his interview with Alondra Nelson, editor of the Afrofuturism special issue of *Social Text*, the author “can blatantly show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible” (Ibid). This is seen in both *Black No More* and *Your Face in Mine*, for the central characters delve headfirst into the fantastical as they confront and undermine the racial order and usher in a counter-future where the impossible becomes a distinct possibility.

Speaking, then, of the novel as the vehicle through which that message is communicated and the impossible is made real, Row states his belief that “novels—or any art form—can have a powerful impact on people’s perceptions of race, particularly if they draw attention to the absurd inconsistencies and stereotypes we all carry around with us and don’t want to think about,” this in contrast to “preachy political rhetoric” (Schulman 46) that only expands the divide between the intelligentsia and the masses most deeply affected by the issues such texts can raise. For that core reason, he suggests that “there’s room for art that approaches these issues from the side—as satire, as parody, or as a kind of outlandish speculative proposition. This is a great time to be producing art that makes people uncomfortable” (Ibid). It is that discomfoting focus—vital to works that engage Afrofuturist sensibilities—that makes these works so effective in stimulating conversation and debate, for they do not shy away from taboo topics like miscegenation, racial reassignment, and cultural appropriation that remain contentious in the world today. Rather, these texts use that discomfort as a way to signify exactly the kinds of topics that should be addressed.

In the end, the counter-future that Martin proposes in *Your Face in Mine* is disrupted just as it is in *Black No More*. The impossible becomes possible only for a moment before the world intervenes and the racial order is somehow restored or the forces that aim to change that are sadly counteracted. In this case, Dr. Silpasuvan is killed, taking his trade secrets along with him and forcing the world to find other avenues of building increased cultural understanding than the racial reassignment procedures that he worked tirelessly to create. The fact that both novels highlight a temporal counter-future is therefore significant, especially given the radical nature of the societal transformation that these authors propose. It is almost as if they recognize that the world is not ready yet, that such ideas can only be explored in the crucible of fiction where alternate histories can persist.

Counter-Future as Present Reality: The Insights of *Black No More* and *Your Face in Mine* in a Modern Context

Ultimately, the future that Schuyler and Row both envision in their novels is the reality of the present day. White women have altered the color of their skin and the shapes of their bodies to adopt more Afrocentric features—a phenomenon now known as *blackfishing*—which brings along with it important conversations about cultural appropriation and exploitation of Black bodies for fame and economic benefit. This, Amira Rasool acknowledges in her 2018 article, “Some White Influencers are Being Accused of ‘Blackfishing,’ or Using Makeup to Appear Black.” Establishing a link between blackfishing today and the minstrel tradition, she asserts that this “can be seen as a modernized form of blackface,” for Rasool asserts that it is not only a false imitation of Blackness but also one aimed at increasing the national profiles of its participants after centuries spent trying to redress the notion of Blackness as a contemptible thing. Such individuals, participating in a kind of racial androgyny and the commodification of Blackness, rely on the idea of fictive kinship and

the ways in which the public has been taught to read race to make a successful transition, however temporary—perhaps just a single Instagram post or an entire photoshoot that remains in the global cultural imagination. This rewriting of history has no clear lesson, no sociocultural critique unlike Row and Schuyler’s texts, hence the widespread backlash from people of color online and the overarching importance of Afrofuturist texts in envisioning counter-futures to this, our present reality.

At the same time, skin whitening creams and depigmentation procedures are now available like never before, the market expected to reach a global valuation of twenty-four billion dollars by the year 2027, reaching a compound annual growth rate of 6.1 percent (“Skin Lightening”) due to rising insecurity over physical appearance, colorism, and the lingering stigmas of race. Such skin lightening products, despite the health risks, allow African Americans and other people of color to alter the complexion of their skin to potentially achieve newfound social and economic opportunity like the characters depicted in Row and Schuyler’s works. While the reasoning for these physical transformations is not necessarily the same—for Jim Crow, at least in theory, has come to an end—the ramifications are consistent: the destabilizing (temporary or not, it remains to be seen) of society and the resurgence of conversations about cultural appropriation and the property of race. What, then, can we take from works such as *Black No More* and *Your Face in Mine* in our effort to better understand the dilemmas that we now face regarding race in the twenty-first century and beyond? How can we use the lessons that Schuyler and Row communicate to ensure that we do not delve deeper into the chaos of a world so heavily consumed by race?

Black No More presents a nearly raceless world in which Blackness, for the most part, no longer exists; yet, in that sameness, the racial divide still remains, if not all the more prevalent and concerning than before. It is clear that the eradication of race is not the solution to the troubles that plague American society. After all, as Schuyler proclaims in his autobiography, entitled *Black and Conservative*, “[t]he ability to conserve, consolidate, and change when expedient is the hallmark of individual and group intelligence. It is why the Negro will always be here” (2)—a constant contributing factor to the multicultural fabric of this United States. In *Your Face in Mine*, Jess Row presents a world filled with the beauty of racial difference; yet, in that diversity, a racial divide also persists where some hold stereotypical ethnic notions about one another and a limited cultural understanding leaves some feeling displaced and dispossessed. Racial reassignment for the masses, however, proves unreasonable as a solution to the “isolation and stigmatization” (Row 264) that is evident in the world, so another solution—far less extreme—is needed to affect change.

What we see, in the end, is that by engaging some of the core values of Afrofuturism (such as exaggeration, revision of the historical past, and the presentation of a counter-future not realized in the world today), these authors are able to advance a political and sociocultural message through their texts about race relations and the strategies for building a more unified world. While acts such as miscegenation and complete racial assimilation are clearly not the answer, a convergence of diverse perspectives gets us one step closer to resolving the color line that plagues American society. And while worldwide racial reassignment proves unviable, stepping into another’s shoes to increase our cultural competency is perhaps one solution to improving race relations in a fractured world. Neither solution is perfect and both require a considerable amount of work from people in society, assuming they are even willing to set aside the prejudices and the underlying imperialisms they operate with each day, but they are actions that can get us to that more positive future Afrofuturism hopes to examine and that each novel envisions by the end.

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