



Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* and Karen Sandler's *Tankborn*: The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism

Melanie Marotta

Morgan State University

Abstract

The neo-slave narrative allows contemporary writers to reinforce the African American female experience in science fiction. In the Young Adult (YA) Afrofuturistic novel, *Orleans* (2013), Sherri L. Smith creates a neo-slave narrative and, through it, sends a positive message about the strength of African American females to her readers. Smith's fifteen-year-old female protagonist, Fen de la Guerre, lives in a post-apocalyptic urban space. Hurricanes and plague, Delta Fever, decimate New Orleans; as a result, the government has quarantined the city behind a wall. Whereas in Smith's text, Fen's race is given a cursory mention, Kayla Sandler's *Tankborn* (2011) centers on the issue of race and its influence on identity (Leonard 2003). In *Tankborn*, societal prejudice segregates characters, thereby placing them into a caste system. Much like Fen, Sandler's protagonist, Kayla, exists in a society divided into trait-specific groupings. This society, however, is designed to oppress those deemed necessary for physical labor. Kayla's societal placement is determined by her physical appearance and her origins, which categorize her as a genetically-engineered being (GEN), or a human who was engineered in a tank. Significantly, the discrimination that both Fen and Kayla experience during their respective quests for freedom is reminiscent of that portrayed by slaves in African American narratives. The examination for this study is as follows: in order to ensure the survival of the future generations, Smith's Fen and Sandler's Kayla place themselves figuratively in the role of mother, specifically the twenty-first century version of the slave narrative mother—the community leader.

Keywords: *neo-slave narrative, Tankborn, Orleans, young adult, afrofuturism, post-apocalypse*

In an effort to ensure that the past is remembered and the female-centered aspects of the slave narrative are reinforced, the female neo-slave narrative was created (Beaulieu, 1999, p. xvi). Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (1999) writes, "Contemporary writers have embraced slavery [...] the details of the enslaved existence become a sort of homage to the very humanity of the protagonists and lends to the works a reverence for the past and its attendant hardships" (p. xiv). Ashraf Rushdy (1999) defines neo-slave narratives

as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (p. 3). Unfortunately, the majority of slave narratives tend to be focused on the male experience rather than that of the female. The neo-slave narrative is a way for contemporary writers to reinforce the African American female experience.

In the Young Adult (YA) Afrofuturistic novel, *Orleans* (2013), Sherri L. Smith creates a neo-slave



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

narrative and thereby sends a positive message about the strength of African American females to her readers. Smith's fifteen-year-old female protagonist, Fen de la Guerre, lives in a post-apocalyptic urban space. Hurricanes and plague, Delta Fever, decimate New Orleans; as a result, the government has quarantined the city behind a wall. Those that reside in Orleans are carriers of the fever, which is transmitted by blood. In an effort to stop the disease from spreading, the survivors have separated into tribes according to blood type; those with O-type blood are inherently more resistant to the fever. This grouping of individuals is reminiscent of segregation, but, at first, they look as if that have been selected for self-protection rather than forced by racial discrimination.

Elizabeth Anne Leonard (2003) states that in science fiction (SF), race tends not to be highlighted, but instead appears as one of a character's physical attributes. Leonard (2003) also notes that in some cases, the issue is bypassed entirely. Whereas in Smith's text, Fen's race is given a cursory mention, Kayla Sandler's *Tankborn* (2011) centers on the issue of race and its influence on identity (Leonard 2003). In *Tankborn*, societal prejudice segregates characters, placing them into a caste system. Much like Fen, Sandler's protagonist, Kayla, exists in a society divided into trait-specific groupings. This society, however, is designed to oppress those deemed necessary for physical labor. Kayla's societal placement is determined by her physical appearance and her origins, which categorize her as a GEN, or a genetically-engineered human who was created in a tank. When Kayla asks her highborn friend, Devak, how society decides hierarchal order, he responds, "You're *tankborn*. My mother gave birth to me" (Sandler, 2011). Significantly, the discrimination

that both Fen and Kayla experience during their respective quests for freedom is reminiscent of that portrayed by slaves in African American narratives. The examination for this study is as follows: in order to ensure the survival of the future generations, Smith's Fen and Sandler's Kayla place themselves figuratively in the role of mother, specifically the twenty-first century version of the slave narrative mother—the community leader.

The common thread throughout YA dystopian literature featuring female protagonists is the protagonist's journey from object to subject, from powerless to powerful. Amy Montz, Miranda Green-Barteet, and Sara Day (2014) assert that "contemporary dystopian literature with adolescent women protagonists place young women in unfamiliar, often liminal spaces—caught between destructive pasts and unclear futures—in order to explore the possibilities of resistance and rebellion in such unreal settings" (p. 7). Writers focusing their examinations on YA dystopian novels featuring female protagonists often highlight the fluctuating state of the protagonist's identity and lifestyle, arguing that it is symbolic of the transitional position of the adolescent, which also ensures that the audience can relate to the text at hand. Montz, Green-Bartleet, and Day set out the standard formula for the structure of YA dystopian texts in their introduction, as do their counterparts in the collection. The issue that should be noted, however, is that in many twenty-first century dystopian texts featuring female protagonists, writers utilize a white protagonist, thereby relegating characters of color to minor roles. In Smith's *Orleans*, ethnicity is alluded to—Fen is African American—but not explicitly featured. Although the novel does not focus on race, Smith has structured her text to include traditional aspects of the slave narrative,



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

thereby making Fen's Bildungsroman journey from oppressive forces to self-actualization take on a new significance.

In many YA dystopian novels, stage one of the protagonist's identity development begins by showing the reader the protagonist's place in society as object. In other words, Fen is not powerless, but her behavior is dominated by the desires of others. In a traditional slave narrative, authenticating accounts from white sources are placed before and after that of the slave. Smith has structured her novel much like a slave narrative, dividing her novel into two sections. Smith has placed a "Before" section from 2014 in advance of Fen's "After" section not to validate Fen's story, but rather to show societal aspects from the past that cannot be recreated in Fen's present (Elphick, p. 184). According to Ruth Levitas (2010), "Dystopia (or anti-utopia) represents the fear of what the future may hold if we do not act to avert catastrophe, whereas utopia encapsulates the hope of what might be" (p. 190). In the "Before" section, the narrator does not give information about Fen. Instead, this section functions as a way for the reader to contrast what life is like before and after the onset of the disease and the governmental separation of *Orleans* from the rest of America. Regarding Octavia E. Butler's dystopic *Parables* (1993), Keith Elphick (2014) wrote, "Unlike many novels in the 'topia' genre, Butler understands that once a society has declined past a certain point of debasement, there is no returning to antiquated notions of the past" (p. 184). The "Before" section serves to show the reader what society was once like and that it may not be recreated. The 2056 "After" section contains two narrators, Fen and Daniel, a scientist from the Outer States who comes to *Orleans* to find a cure to the plague. By having a

"Before" and "After" section, Smith shows the past utopic space (New *Orleans*) and present dystopic space (*Orleans*). Here, Fen's story is juxtaposed with Daniel's, but it is Fen's voice that is first heard from *Orleans*. This type of narration serves to temporarily place Fen in a subordinate position. Daniel's point of view—the voice from the Outer States—appears more valuable than Fen's. It is also meant to show that, like Lauren from Butler's *Parables*, Fen's code of conduct, her approach to life, will ensure the survival of future generations (Elphick, 2014, p. 185). As Elphick (2014) observes it is not the adults with their past societal notions that will be successful, but the youth of the present with their new outlook on life. Eventually in the novel, Fen's voice will dominate Daniel's, thereby showing that hope for the *Orleans'* future generations exists with an African American female who prizes community and survival.

In her first stage of development, Fen is subject to the ideologies of adults: her parents, her tribe, and the Outer States' government. As the "After" section, which is aptly titled "Tribe", begins, Fen seems like a typical YA dystopian protagonist. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hint (2014) identify the primary themes in YA dystopian literature, noting "conformity" as a method of achieving status as object (p. 3). The authors demonstrate how "[o]ften such conformist societies embrace their uniformity out of a fear that diversity breeds conflict" (Basu, Broad, and Hintz, 2014, p. 3). Fen is first shown at the *Orleans'* market involved in an illegal blood trade with McCallan, a smuggler. Members of her tribe are not permitted to trade for blood because it is dangerous. Fen looks like she is rebelling against her community's precepts by engaging in this trade. She is, in fact, trying to protect Lydia, her tribe's chief, by



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

obtaining untainted blood for her. Lydia is about to give birth, and Fen thinks that she may need a blood transfusion. Lydia is both Fen's community leader and surrogate mother, so she takes on substantial risks to protect her and the tribe. While Fen appears to be rebelling against her tribe's guidelines by bartering for blood, she is, in fact, offering her subjectivity to the head of her tribe. Even though *Orleans* does not have an official governing head (Pulliam, 2014, p. 172), the behavior of the populace is guided by the chief of each tribe and, through them, the precepts of the government are transferred.

Fen, like Katniss in Suzanne Collins's novel *Hunger Games*, transcends the constraints of the gender-based roles assigned to her by her society, as evidenced in both her actions and appearance. When Fen initially appears in the novel, her behavior is comparable to that of slaves in narratives instead of the community leader. While a small number of female slaves were expected to perform domestic duties, such as working in the houses, the majority worked in the fields completing the same tasks as men. In her discussion of masculine and feminine behavior in District 12 of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), June Pulliam related (2014) that "women of the districts do not have the luxury of cultivating learned helplessness or dressing in ways that would constrain their mobility, as their labor is required to ensure the survival of all" (p. 175). *The Hunger Games*, one of the most famed YA dystopian novels currently in existence, is similar to Smith's novel, as both *Orleans* and *The Hunger Games* are reminiscent of the slave narrative. Fen and Katniss's actions are much like that of the female slave, meaning that they are willing to complete any task necessary to ensure the survival of their respective communities (Pulliam, 2014, p. 176). In reference to

the formation of identity, Trites (2000) remarks, "How an adolescent defines herself in terms of race, gender, and class often determines her access to power in her specific situation" (p. 47). When Smith introduces Fen, she is trading for untainted blood. Because the marketplace is dangerous, she trades outside of it instead of in it. Fen is not clearly marked as masculine or feminine by her appearance, nor is her ethnicity clearly identified. The only identifier of both gender and ethnicity is a minor note Smith includes about Fen's hair: Lydia, her tribe's chief, has plaited it in braids and piled it on her head. Fen also says that McCallan refers to her during the trade as "Miss Fen" and suggests that she may be the one who is pregnant. Fen's description of her physical appearance and McCallan's statements label her female; her placement and behavior at the market, a traditionally female space, make her gender neutral. Because she takes the role of the caregiver, she is female, even though she may not otherwise appear to belong to this gender. She follows the guidelines of her society by protecting Lydia, the member that can assist in her survival, so Fen's breaking the rules about illegal blood trades is well worth the risk to her. Since *Orleans* is a twenty-first century YA dystopian novel, Fen, like Katniss, is able to transverse traditional gendered boundaries. In fact, when Fen is labeled feminine rather than gender neutral, she is less powerful, less effective in her tasks. McCallan attempts to take advantage of Fen, keeping the gold she gave him without giving her the blood. When Fen calls attention to McCallan's ogling her and demands her refund, he complies.

In the first stage of her development towards becoming the community leader, Fen is compliant with the guidelines of her society. Throughout *Orleans*, Fen repeats the phrase "Tribe is life". The code for survival has been taught to Fen first by



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

her father and then by her chief; these behavioral guidelines are revealed in fragments until the second stage of Fen's development where more information is disclosed. By herself, Fen ventures away from her tribe in order to procure the supplies needed in order to ensure her leader's survival. Fen rigorously follows social procedures and exudes confidence while away from Lydia's. Once her gaze falls upon Lydia, however, Fen reveals her liminality with regard to gendered behavior. Pulliam (2014) notes that Collins' Katniss despises her mother's failure to care for her family and sees it as "feminine weakness" (p. 175). In a similar moment, when Fen encounters Lydia tending to the sick in the hospital, she feels uncomfortable and inadequate. Fen describes Lydia's appearance, highlighting distinctly feminine features—braids and a dress. Comparing Lydia appearance to her own, Fen thinks that Lydia looks "like a queen" whereas she is "a scarecrow next to her" (Smith, 2013). Fen is highly critical of Lydia's femininity; the comments she makes are a defense mechanism used to mask her true feelings of uncertainty. Lydia is shown as feminine and a leader; Fen calls attention to her sovereignty and her advanced pregnancy. In her statement, Fen refers to herself as unrefined and a follower, not like Lydia. To Fen, Lydia completes the ultimate transgression, placing herself in danger of contracting the plague, but Fen is powerless to stop her. Fen's "access to power" has been negated (Trites, 2000, p. 47). Even though she is close to Lydia, Fen's self-importance has been deflated. She has been reduced to inexperienced adolescent and community member rather than mature, confident leader.

In the first stage of Fen's development, Lydia is the slave mother figure, but once she dies, Fen takes on this role. In Fen's second stage, she unconsciously takes action in order to alter the

future for Lydia's newborn child, aptly named Baby Girl. In reference to the slave mother and her legal state as property, Beaulieu (1999) observes that any offspring "would by law follow the condition of their enslaved mother" (p. 11). Just as children of slaves become slaves themselves, children born in *Orleans* are objectified as their families are before them. They are not valuable Outer States citizens, but remnants of a former society monitored by the Outer States' government. Smith continues to follow the pattern of the slave narrative: the child, Baby Girl (later named Enola), is forcefully separated from her mother, only to be raised by a surrogate parent, Fen. Historically, in the antebellum South, children born into slavery were frequently removed from their mothers at an early age to be raised by elderly female slaves. According to Frederick Douglass (1995), this occurred because slave masters desired to stifle or destroy the emotional attachment a slave child has to his or her mother. When Lydia dies after giving birth, Fen feels obligated to take responsibility for Lydia's child as Lydia was her chief and surrogate mother. During Baby Girl's birth, Fen's O-positive (OP) tribe is massacred, so, in actuality, Fen and Baby Girl are the only community each other has remaining. Fen goes to great lengths to save Lydia's child from becoming infected with the fever. At this point in her development, Fen is not emotionally attached to Lydia's child, but she still sees herself as an OP rather than an individual. Beaulieu (1999) identified the neo-slave narrative as concentrating on developing the main character's identity and her connection to her enslaved family (p. 25). Once Lydia dies, Fen draws on the teachings from her past, which help her to form an identity as an individual; her individuality is Fen's third stage of development. As a young child, Fen loses two communities: her parents and that at the research



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

institute. In her youth Fen and her parents reside at a research institute because the scientists claim that by studying her they can cure the plague. In this second stage, these communities are gone and all that remains is the knowledge that they passed on to her, which often appears in the form of memories. These teachings guide Fen's life choices, and these memories are how she makes contact with her past relations, as Beaulieu (1999) observes.

By intermixing Fen's memories and her present day accounts, Smith highlights the influence of her various communities on the formation of her identity. As Fen's tribe lies in ruins, she chooses to hide with Baby Girl, but inadvertently falls asleep. When Fen rises, she discovers that she is grasping her knife, prepared to defend herself against an attack. Elphick (2014) observes, "Dystopian authors achieve their goal of reawakening citizens to their own troubled social structure" (p. 172). Here, Elphick discusses the writer/reader relationship in the dystopic text, but the concept applies to Fen's situation. When she regains consciousness, the severity of the situation impacts Fen and she chastises herself for her human response to exhaustion. Regrettably, her first thoughts are not for her community, which is represented as Baby Girl, but for herself.

While Lydia is alive but Fen is separated from her, Fen is sure of herself and understands what needs to be done in order to protect her leader. Once she renews contact with Lydia, however, Fen appears uncertain and subservient, deferring major decisions to Lydia. Fen behaves in this manner because her identity is in transition and she continues to need authority figures to help her change into a self-assured adult. When Lydia dies, her education from her tribe has come to an end; this moment also marks Fen's shift in power. Fen is

thrust into the caregiver position for the child. She obtains food for the baby and must rely on herself for survival. Even though Fen acknowledges that the tribe no longer exists and she is on her own with the child, she falls back on tribe teachings. These teachings are modified—Fen discards archaic notions about gender and utilizes the knowledge that gives her confidence about her choices.

In her third stage of development, Fen consciously takes action in her society in order to enact change. Both Fen and Daniel have been kidnapped by those wishing to steal their blood; after they meet in captivity, they agree on a trade. Elphick (2014) states, "the characters in many critical dystopias painstakingly struggle to *adapt* to and *better* the problems facing them in these texts' microcosmic societies" (p. 173). Whereas Daniel seeks knowledge about the city's layout, Fen wants food, clothing, and an escape from *Orleans* for Baby Girl. For Fen, taking care of both Baby Girl and Daniel is a required chore. Only once they reach Mr. Go, a family friend, and learn of the liminal state of *Orleans* does Fen choose to claim the child as her own. As in the African tradition, Fen waits to name the child until she is in the presence of a community elder, Mr. Go. Her naming the child—Enola after East New *Orleans*—shows her desire to acknowledge the child as part of her community rather than just as a debt owed to Lydia. When the trio leaves Mr. Go and encounters the O-Negative (O-Neg) tribe, Fen announces to their leader, Davis, while the child may have been Lydia's, "'She mine, now'" (Smith, 2013). In order to show she refuses to accept her objectified state, Fen chooses to make a public display denouncing it. Similarly, Pulliam (2014) documents two of the most renowned open rebellions in *The Hunger Games*, specifically when Katniss grieved for her friend, Rue, on camera,



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

and when she and Peeta attempted suicide. In a discussion of race, Leonard (2003) refers to this moment in SF as “rendering the invisible visible” (p. 257). Fen rebels against her objectification, removing herself from her liminal space once she asserts her power in her meeting with Davis, the head of the O-Negs. Many of Davis’s tribe died in the attack on the powwow with the Ops and he wants this debt to be paid with Baby Girl’s life. When Fen refuses, she engages in a very public scene, an “open rebellion,” and launches herself into the role of tribe leader (Pulliam, 2014, p. 179). Davis tries to ensure that Fen remains in her objectified state by referring to her as “Lydia’s pet,” a slight to which Fen responds with strength. Instead of sacrificing the child, as she tries to do in her second stage of development while they are being chased by dogs, she offers herself (much like Katniss does) as payment for the deaths and fights Davis publicly. She allows him to win for appearance’s sake, and, as a result, she saves the trio from death. Fen’s ultimate sacrifice, however, comes when she chooses to save her child’s life over her own.

Fen comes to the realization that there is no place safe for this child, who is not valued in this space as anything but a commodity, so she has Daniel take Baby Girl over the Wall. In an interview about *Kindred*, the foremost female neo-slave narrative, Octavia E. Butler discussed the slave’s escape with Nick DiCharrio (2004, pp. 206-207). DiCharrio (2004) asked Butler about her choice to set *Kindred* in a border state, to which she responded, “Because I wanted my character to have a legitimate hope of escape” (p. 206). Like Butler, Smith places her novel in a border state, making a route to freedom possible for a fortunate few. In reference to the critical dystopia, Elphick (2014) stated, “there is a sense of hope and unity in these novels that has kept it apart from the

despair engulfing the classic dystopias” (p. 173). Both Butler and Smith elect to save the characters that represent the possibility for a favorable future. During the escape, Fen draws attention away from Daniel and Baby Girl: she takes Daniel’s coat, which she forms to look like the baby’s body, and runs screaming through the moat towards the soldiers. The image of the escaping slave appears repeatedly throughout Smith’s text, calling to mind the image of the slave fleeing pursuing slave hunters toward freedom, wading through water in order to flee pursuing masters and/or fugitive slave hunters, but Smith uses Fen to create a new image. Daniel and the child reach freedom while Fen is repeatedly shot; through her ultimate ruse, she enables her child to reach the plague-free Outer States. In a twist to the traditional slave narrative structure, Fen is depicted running in the direction of the soldiers. Fen chooses her own version of freedom—she elects to die by the hand of the soldiers while saving her community rather than succumb to the plague. To the soldiers, Fen is only a body, another sufferer of the plague. In actuality, Fen regains control of her commodified body and chooses to surrender her life in exchange for her child’s freedom. In slave narratives, the slave’s escape is the pivotal moment. Smith uses both the standard escape closing from the slave narrative and the critical dystopian ending to close the novel. She leaves her readers with the image of resistance, of Enola “waving her small fists at the weeping sky,” the resilience of the next generation, and the symbol of the fight to escape oppression still to come (Smith, 2013). As the text closes, the audience comes to the realization that the slave’s journey to freedom depicted here is not just that of Fen, but rather of the next generation, that of Enola.

Just as Smith’s *Orleans* tracked Fen’s own neo-slave



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

narrative, Sandler's young adult novel *Tankborn* documents a female protagonist's—Kayla's—journey from oppression to freedom, following her escape from socially-endorsed slavery. In a discussion of Butler's *Kindred* and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), both novels which emphasize the effects of familial slavery on their protagonists, Beaulieu (1999) observes, "these authors work like archeologists, attempting to uncover the secrets of the past, sometimes to instruct heroines who are confused about their present and unsure of their future" (p. 142). In reference to the most famous neo-slave narratives from female writers, Madhu Dubey (2009) stated, "what distinguishes [Toni] Morrison's and Butler's uses of this genre is their focus on black women's unique experience of reproductive slavery" (p. 164). Sandler's novel follows Kayla's origin story: during childhood, scientists transform Kayla from a physically challenged child into one who is genetically engineered. In reference to the most famous neo-slave narratives from female writers, Madhu Dubey (2009) stated, "what distinguishes [Toni] Morrison's and Butler's uses of this genre is their focus on black women's unique experience of reproductive slavery" (p. 164). In order for Kayla to reach stage three of her development she must, much as former slaves have depicted in narratives, document her knowledge of her origins. By uncovering the truth of her trueborn origins, Kayla determines Loki is a false utopia, and through this revolution, thereby destabilizes the social constructs that place beings in a discriminatory hierarchal society. In stage one, however, Kayla appears in her socially-constructed familial space awaiting her assignment in the trueborn sector.

Scholars have criticized science fiction as a genre for the failure to clearly identify the ethnicity of

their protagonists even in neo-slave narratives, a shortcoming partially evidenced in Smith's ambiguity about Fen's race. On one hand, Rushdy (1999) argues that during the 1960s writers created a new genre, the neo-slave narrative, in order to reclaim the slave narrative from white writers, thereby ensuring that the authentic African American experience may be shown. On the other hand, Mary J. Couzelis (2014) notes, in SF race tends to be either ignored, thereby placing preference on whiteness, or depicted as existing singularly. Couzelis writes, "Novels that ignore race or present a monochromatic future imply that other ethnicities do not survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important" (2014, p. 131). Unlike Smith, who only hints at Fen's ethnicity, Sandler places race in the foreground as she introduces Kayla and Jal. When the text opens, Kayla is objectified by certain members of Lokian society and by the community's precepts. By describing Jal as "her slender, black-skinned nurture brother" (Sandler, 2011), the narrator instantly emphasizes race and non-standard familial relations. Kayla is black, female, and a GEN. While Kayla's status as a slave is not directly stated upon the text's opening, she is immediately cast as the slave mother character.

In the first stage of her development, Kayla is objectified: she is the commodified body. Historically, slaves were seen as having value and were considered property, much like GENs are. Each GEN has a "sket," a skill set incorporated into her or his genetic make-up while in the tank; Kayla's is her excessive physical strength. In the American slaveholding South, both female and male slaves were expected to be physical laborers. By emphasizing Kayla's physical abilities, Sandler draws a parallel between GENs and African



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

American slaves. Unlike her best friend, Mishalla, who is described as having the nurturer sket, Kayla has been built for physical labor. On her Thirdday holiday, Tala, Kayla's nurture-mother, directs Kayla to watch Jal. As Kayla describes her duties, her familial structure, and her religious studies, she shows that she is not permitted to have a normal adolescence. She is, instead, thrust into the role of slave mother. While Jal gets to play, Kayla tends to him rather than spending time with her companions. While it may appear like a task required in ordinary adolescence, that a female look after a child, this image of the female pressed into service leans towards the stereotypical behavior of the slave mother. Kayla is placed in this role, defined not by her individual identity but by her race, gender, and class. When the Earth is deemed a wasteland, people moved to Loki in an effort to start again; unfortunately, they brought their caste system with them in an effort to recreate their former society (Elphick, 2014, p. 184). Kayla does not get the opportunity to explore who she could become. Instead, societal members with status deem her imperfect, place her in the tank, and alter her body. Those with rank choose her life for her.

It must be noted that critical examination of YA literature featuring African American characters is lacking. There is, however, one exception. With the rise in popularity of *The Hunger Games*, examinations of both Rue and Katniss have been prevalent. Meghan Gilbert-Hickey (2014) examines Rue's district, noting the similarities to the antebellum Southern United States. Rue resides in District Eleven, an area concentrated on agriculture, "where the children miss school during the harvest and workers are publically whipped for eating the crops" (Gilbert-Hickey, 2014, p. 12). Subsequently, the district's characters evoke

images of field slaves. In *Tankborn*, even though the GENS' Chadi sector does not appear to contain a specific industry, it is reminiscent of the Jim Crow South. Its industry is, in fact, the readying of GENS for assignment; this preparation includes ensuring that GENS are conditioned to understand their position in Lokian society. Throughout the novel, GENS are often segregated from the rest of the Lokian populace. For example, while Kayla and Jal are by the Chadi River, it becomes clear that the river separates the poverty-stricken Chadi sector from wealthy Foresthill, the trueborn sector. While working for Zul Manel, her trueborn master, Kayla is required to stand in a marked section of a clothing store, away from other castes, but always in full view of everyone. She is also required to ride in the back of motor vehicles, just as the Jim Crow Laws of the U.S. South had required.

The Chadi sector and the river are the first symbols in the novel of people forcefully separated by space. The GENS live in their own sector but, according to Kayla, it is not safe even though they are permitted to be there. They must constantly live in fear of racial violence from the trueborns. As Kayla grows wary of the trueborns' presence near their sector, she calls for Jal to move away from the river. Unfortunately, he does not comprehend Kayla's warning about impending violence and refuses, thereby placing them both in danger. As in the American antebellum south and Lokian society, it is irrelevant whether or not a slave errs; she or he is punished regardless. The GENS are conditioned to adhere to societal guidelines for their caste, and if any are violated, their personalities may be erased. Their bodies may be recycled and used to create other GENS. In other words, a violation of behavioral guidelines or a false accusation of such an act may result in literal, or figurative death for



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

GENs. In order to transform from object to subject, Kayla must put aside her fear of reprisal and become a leader for her people.

Although Kayla has little power in her society, in her role of slave mother, she proves adaptable and fights to safeguard her people despite her disadvantaged status. While Kayla is objectified in Lokian society—she is considered to be powerless—she also exists as the slave mother, there to protect her community. Even though Kayla believes in ensuring that the statutes regarding GENs are not violated, she sees her nurture-brother in danger and acts. In reference to Butler's *Parables* (1993), Elphick (2014) documented the religion, Earthseed, that Lauren creates and how it "places the individual's ability to adapt to his world as the ultimate power" (p. 188). Once Kayla witnesses the trueborn Livot injure Jal with a rock, she prays to the GEN god, the Infinite, and puts herself in harm's way by running to aid Jal. She also proceeds to verbally insist that Jal flee from incoming danger. As with the slave mother figure, Kayla's first thought is of protection for her community. Unfortunately, Kayla's heroic act is tainted by the narrator's description of the next steps she takes to save Jal. Instead of focusing on Kayla's selfless act, the reader's attention is placed on Kayla's non-human qualities—the animal DNA, which makes her extremely strong and links her to the stereotype of the slave as being animalistic.

Throughout slave narratives, slaves are repeatedly documented as being treated as chattel. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1995), Douglass writes about his return to the plantation in Talbot County, Maryland, in order to be valued after the death of his master. Here, Douglass delineates how the slaves are placed alongside the farm's livestock

as both are categorized as property. Throughout this quintessential slave narrative, Douglass repeatedly compared the slave's existence to that of an animal's in order to reinforce the notion that slaves were looked upon as animalistic and also to promote the need for a reclassification of slaves as human beings rather than property. Although Kayla steps in, physically takes hold of Jal, and proceeds to carry him ashore when trueborn Devak Manel prevents his friend, Livot, from tossing another projectile at Jal, Sandler's description of Kayla's animalistic state undermines her heroism and agency. While Kayla's behavior may look heroic—she is protecting Jal from physical injury and/or death—this impression is short-lived. The narrator notes that because "The bank was steep enough she had to pull herself up on all fours, but as usual the hyper-genned strength of her upper body got the better of her lower. She fumbled more than once, muddying her knees, adding to the ugly ankle-high sludge staining her best leggings" (Sandler, 2011). Kayla is portrayed as animalistic and uncoordinated. Before she maneuvers Jal out of the river, the two trueborns converse about Kayla's animal DNA, indicating their belief that she is partially porcine. As Kayla is in stage one of her development, she is objectified by both the trueborns and the narrator. The description of Kayla's heroic act is disparaging, her act of rebellion repressed and overshadowed by her analogy to a brute, another stock trait of the slave stereotype. Before Devak gets too close, Kayla informs Jal that he must go to their residence and, if she does not arrive later, tell their nurture-mother, Tala, where she has been. Kayla acts as a leader once more, protecting her community, before she reverts to her former objectified self and loses her power. Once Devak arrives in front of her, the comparisons regarding her appearance begin and her oppression continues.



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

While whiteness is not predominant in Sandler's novel, a certain appearance is shown to be preferred amongst the characters. Upon meeting Devak, Kayla looks him over appraisingly and then herself disparagingly. First, she admires Devak's "straight and glossy" hair while criticizing hers for being "wild and kinked"; she also includes Jal's "tight curls" in her description of appearance, a trait unsuitable in Loki as it indicates GEN association (Sandler, 2011). She splits traits into two groups: those which belong to trueborns and that which identify GENs (which, therefore, the majority consider undesirable). Devak's skin is described as "the perfect color, a rich medium brown. Not near black like Jal's, nor the pale mud color of her own skin, but a warm shade in between. The color of status" (Sandler, 2011). Devak is neither white nor black, thereby symbolically shown as inhabiting an in-between space. Devak and other trueborns are able to travel to any sector, their travel permits existing in the form of the body. Trueborns' complexions and ornate ear balis reveal their status to others, ensuring freedom of movement even as appearance hinders movement for other castes. In the "Author's Note" that follows *Tankborn* (2011), Sandler imparts the origins of the novel, stating that first it was a screenplay; however, when it was not produced, she revised the text, turning it into a novel. Specifically, Sandler retained Kayla and the GENs' characters, but the "caste system crept in, inspired by my long-ago conversations with an Indian-born co-worker" (Sandler, Author's Note). Sandler attempts to call attention to the plight of many oppressed peoples, but the inclusion of too many obscure her point by making it appear that all oppressed people have the same experiences, which is untrue. Devak, who may represent a person of Indian descent, has his appearance designated as ideal by Kayla. Kayla disparages her

own appearance, which resembles that of a person of African descent, and focuses her comments mainly on hair and complexion. The remarks that Kayla makes about her appearance are primarily within her mind, showing how her oppressed state leads to self-hatred and loss of voice. Kayla fleetingly wonders about the differing appearances of humans on Loki, noting her GEN friend Beela's physical traits and their similarities to those of the trueborns.

Though Fen and Kayla both free themselves from their objectified states in the end, the process of doing so for Kayla requires more developmental stages than it did for Fen. Fen's first stage of development includes the identification of the objectified state; subsequently, in stage two, she unconsciously takes action to remove herself from her oppressed state. Unlike Fen, Kayla does not take action to free herself from oppression until her third stage. During Kayla's first stage of development, she acts to protect Jal, but not to remove him or herself from the objectified state. Even though Kayla violates social codes by defending Jal, speaking with Devak, and questioning her origins, she is still immersed in an oppressed community. When offered her first Assignment, Kayla begrudgingly accepts it, thereby continuing the practice of the GEN as slave. Notably, if Kayla had refused her Assignment, she could have been reset, or murdered. When she accepts, doubt creeps into her mind before being forcefully separated from her nurture-family. It is pushed aside by her devotion to the GEN god: "She knew it was the Infinite's will, that a GEN's trial of servitude was the only way back to His hands" (Sandler, 2011). This god, unbeknownst to Kayla until her third stage, has been created in order to ensure obedience from the GENs to the trueborns and their societal hierarchy. For Kayla, as with



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

many slaves, religion offers strength. Even when it is revealed that her god is created as a method of control, Kayla continues to worship, thereby revealing that she refuses to be dominated. Trites (2000), in reference to power, stated that there is a “relationship between discourse and action” (p. 48). In her mind, Kayla protests by expressing distaste for her societal guidelines, creating a solitary discourse; by doing so, she acknowledges that the hierarchy is flawed. Despite its flaws, however, she retreats in prayer, refusing to take action and repressing her rebellious spirit due to her fear of reprisal. In front of Tala and Jal, Kayla verbally asserts her loathing for the trueborns, but only when she is safely within the domestic space; once she is removed, she is alone amongst those that see her as inferior.

In the second stage of her transition, Kayla is offered illegal information from the rebels while she is in her domestic space, but it is in front of a GEN enforcer. At this point, Kayla does not know that Skal is a member of the resistance. In order for information to be transferred to the GENs, a datapod is placed against the GEN's tattoo. The transfer is a symbolic rape. During this transfer, the GEN may lose consciousness, does feel pain, and bleeds from the point of insertion. Even though Kayla knows Skal, he is a GEN enforcer and cannot be trusted. When uploaded, the information from the Kinship—the rebels desire for equality in Loki—informs her that there is a mysterious packet that she must hide. Debra Walker King (2008), in *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, documented multiple moments during lynchings of African Americans where the men elected to remain silent. King stated, “Silence emerges as a defensive strategy, a mobility that allows torture victims some control over the way they experience and navigate pain and racial hurt. It is a way of

rising above victimization, if only symbolically” (2008, p. 93). Once Kayla receives the message, she debates within herself its authenticity. She does not verbalize that she has received a message from the rebellion, nor does she tell anyone about the packet of information she is to protect. When she cannot find the packet in her bag, she dismisses the message until after Tanti is reset. Once Jal's friend, Tanti, is realigned by enforcer Ansgar for doing something as harmless as touching his datapod, Kayla begins to take more chances with her life and for her freedom. When Kayla locates the packet of information, she unconsciously takes action towards her freedom. At this time Kayla is unaware that the packet is from the Kinship, but she is still willing to conceal it stitched into a pair of her leggings. When she goes on Assignment, Kayla brings this packet to the trueborn sector. Importantly, Kayla becomes the caregiver for Zul, Devak's grandfather. It is Zul that is the leader of the rebellion and who also assisted in creating the GENs. He is able to offer Kayla information about her origins that she lacks.

At the Manel house, Kayla continues on her journey to the subjective position; in order to enact change in her society, Kayla must first obtain information that she will use to alter her own perspective regarding her place in Lokian society. Kayla cares for the elderly Zul, who, unbeknownst to her, unwillingly aided in the creation of the GENs and is a founder of the Kinship. Here, Sandler alludes to the master/slave relationship prevalent in slave narratives. In the traditional slave narrative, the narrator recounts many instances in which false information has been transmitted to slaves; this information is not discounted because the slaves, due to illiteracy, are unable to do so. Repeatedly in the novel, GENs assert the rumor that if a GEN touches a trueborn, then the GEN will be injured.



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

In her neo-slave narrative, Sandler addresses the master/slave relationship from a new standpoint: Zul is the contrite, heroic figure for which Kayla has sympathy. Because of this relationship, many myths are debunked—the GEN creation story and the establishment of the caste system—which results in Kayla defying the ruling authority's guidelines. Importantly, the body becomes a site of resistance that enables Kayla's rebellious acts. According to King (2000), in order to secure survival for their children, African American mothers in literature often relinquish a part of their bodies. In particular, King (2000) referred to Toni Morrison's *Sethe's* loss of mother's milk and Eva Peace's leg. In *Tankborn*, Kayla touches Zul without gloves and finds that there are no ill effects; later, Kayla verbally asserts to Devak that she is a human as he is. Kayla gives up the false beliefs regarding GENs instilled in her. Both aforementioned acts show that unconsciously her behavior regarding her enslavement is changing and she is headed towards freedom for herself.

In the third stage of her development, Kayla consciously acts to free herself from her forced confinement. As subject, Kayla chooses to take action that will, inevitably, change her society's caste system. Kayla's friend, Mishalla, is kidnapped by those, including Director Manel, who steal children in order to change them into GENs. Zul requests that Devak illegally enter the GEN monitoring Grid and that Kayla assist him. At this point, Kayla has been used to store data regarding the Kinship's uprising; she rightfully questions Zul's placing the information within her without her permission. She also accepts the task of illegally entering Director Manel's office and aids Devak in doing so in order to obtain the information needed to find Mishalla and the missing children. Once Kayla understands that she and other trueborn children who have been born with physical

challenges are being transformed into GENs, she consciously chooses to assist the resistance. Kayla both voices her idea for breaking the door to Mishalla's prison down and completes the physical act. After Director Manel and his associates have been arrested and the stolen children returned to their families, Kayla officially joins the resistance in order to locate any other missing children. As in the slave narrative, Kayla is last witnessed freed from slavery and on her way to assisting others to break free as well.

Through their activism, both Fen and Kayla assist in securing freedom for future generations. When Fen is shown in her objectified state, she seems strong-willed and independent, but not community-minded. Stereotypically, the slave mother thinks more about the community, sacrificing herself in the process in the same way Lydia risks her health to care for the dying. Fen does not verbally reprimand Lydia about her actions, noting "No use telling her she a fool for being here when she carrying a new life and her time being so close" (Smith, 2013). Fen's parents show her how to protect herself, but only herself. Lydia teaches Fen to not only care for others through her ministering to the dying, but also to make choices that serve her community well. Through her parents and Lydia's teachings, which she applies while caring for Baby Girl, Fen transitions from adolescent to community leader. Her consciously chosen act of self-sacrifice, her life for Baby Girl's, reveals her desire to protect the *Orleans* society and to ensure its survival. When the novel concludes, both Fen and Baby Girl are depicted as slaves freed from societal objectification. In her own way, by embracing her ability to choose, even Fen escapes her state of bondage.

In *Tankborn*, Kayla is born into slavery, her



The Female Leader, the Neo-Slave Narrative, and Twenty-first Century Young Adult Afrofuturism, *continued*

societal ideology engrained into her identity. Kayla is discontent in her objectified state, but is powerless to alter it until she obtains knowledge from the rebellion. Once she enters her second stage of development, Kayla fluctuates between rebelliousness and compliance. During the third stage of her development, Kayla discovers that there is a cure for being a GEN; if taken, the GEN will transform into a human. In a discussion of what she termed “identity politics”, Trites (2000) stated that “Those who rebel against the mores of their social class are still identified in terms of the institution they are rejecting: their behavior as rebels is defined in terms of what they reject about social class as an institution” (p. 46). Kayla, rather than take it herself, elects to give the antidote to Mishalla, thereby remaining a GEN. Even though not taking the cure means that she cannot move from her state of bondage, she chooses the freedom of another over her own. Through her act of electing to remain a GEN, Kayla shows that she not only embraces her identity, but also that she is willing to work as an activist, helping to transform her

society into one that values equality instead of intolerance and the community over the individual. By emphasizing both the community and the individual, Fen and Kayla reveal themselves to be true leaders. In authentic critical dystopian style, Smith and Sandler conclude their respective novels by hinting to their readers the possibility for future societal change in Fen and Kayla’s communities (Elphick, 2014, p. 173).

It is the SF critical dystopia that allows readers to see adolescents as powerful, as enacting change in their respective communities. Unfortunately, SF texts featuring African American female characters still appear infrequently. When they do, the characters tend to have minor roles, their plotlines buried behind that of the white characters. While both Smith and Sandler’s characters’ portrayal could have been improved by placing more emphasis on ethnicity, *Orleans* and *Tankborn* drew much-needed attention to African American females in twenty-first century YA SF.



References

- Beaulieu, E.A. (1999). *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Bernardo, S. (2014). A Case of Terraphilia: Longing for Place and Community in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. In S.M. Bernardo (ed.), *Environments in Science Fiction: Essays on Alternative Spaces* (154-170). Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Butler, O.E. (2010). "A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler." In C. Francis (ed.), *Conversations with Octavia Butler* (206-212). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Collins, C. (2008). *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.
- Couzelis, M.J. (2014). "The Future is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels." In B. Basu, K.R. Broad, and C. Hintz (eds.), *Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* (131-44). Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz (eds.). New York: Routledge.
- Day, S.K., Green-Barteet, M.A., and Montz, A.L. (2014). Introduction: From "New Woman" to "Future Girl": The Roots and the Rise of the Female Protagonist in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopias. In Day, S.K., Green-Barteet, M.A., and Montz, A.L. (eds.), *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (1-14). Surrey, UK: Ashgate. Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present. Retrieved from PDF file.
- Douglass, F. (1995). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Dover Thrift Editions. Retrieved from Kindle file.
- Dubey, M. (2009). "Even Some Fiction Might Be Useful": African American Women Novelists. In Angelyn Mitchell, Danille K. Taylor (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (150-167). Angelyn Mitchell, Danille K. Taylor (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elphick, K. (2014). Discursive Transgressions and Ideological Negotiations: From Orwell's 1984 to Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In Susan M. Bernardo (ed.), *Environments in Science Fiction: Essays on Alternative Spaces* (171-190). Susan M. Bernardo (ed.). Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Gilbert-Hickey, M. (2014). "Good and Safe": Violence and the Gothic Pedagogy of Appropriateness in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy. *Storytelling: A Critical Journal of Popular Narrative*. Retrieved from PDF file.
- King, D.W. (2000). Writing in Red Ink. In D.W. King (ed.), *Body politics and the fictional double* (56-70). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- King, D.W. (2008). *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Leonard, E.A. (2003). Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction. In E. James and F. Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (253-63). Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levitas, R. (2010). *The Concept of Utopia*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Pulliam, J. (2014). Real or Not Real—Katniss Everdeen Loves Peeta Melark: The Lingering Effects of Discipline in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy. In A. Montz, M.A., Green-Barteet, and S.K. Day (eds.), *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* (171-85). Amy Montz, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Sara K. Day (eds.). Surrey, UK: Ashgate. Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present. Retrieved from PDF file.
- Rushdy, A. (1999). *Neo-Slave Narratives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sandler, K. (2011). *Tankborn*. New York: TU. Retrieved from Kindle file.
- Smith, S.L. (2013). *Orleans*. New York: Penguin. Retrieved from Kindle file.
- Trites, R.S. (2000). *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Representation in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: University of Iowa.