

BOOK REVIEW

Melvin G. Hill, ed. *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019. vii + 227 pp. Figures. Index. \$39.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781498583824.

With ten essays and an editorial introduction, *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture*, edited by Melvin G. Hill, offers an array of insightful perspectives on the intersections of science, technology, and Black subjectivity, particularly in works of African American literature and culture. Focused on American histories and experiences of race, these essays present compelling frameworks for examining Black identity and being in an effort to transcend and enhance the human—understood as “transhumanism”—through medical, algorithmic, digital, and other technologies. The collection’s focus on transhumanism means that the essays also touch on the debates surrounding posthumanism and Afrofuturism.

Several essays focus on the problems and possibilities that arise from miscegenation and reproduction, which the authors argue can be read as transhumanist technologies for modifying the human. In the case of the British colonies in the Caribbean, Md. Monirul Islam (Chapter One) shows how racial mixing was proposed as a new method of colonial subject formation and control, the thinking being that “miscegens” would embody both European intellect and African strength to improve production in the plantations. Miscegenation would also hinder any slave rebellions organized on the basis of skin color. In an instance of undermining the biological fixtures of race, Melvin G. Hill (Chapter Five) presents George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More* (1931 [reprint Dover 2011]) as an Afro-transhumanist novel in which its protagonist, Max Disher, who is Black, undergoes genetic transformation to become white. This subsequently upends the racial and racist binaries that define the United States, which later culminates in white nativist riots. These essays contend that the Black self, formed through histories of slavery and racism, is already a site for transhuman endeavors, imagination, and disruption.

Other essays in the collection take up what Kristen Lillvis calls “posthuman Blackness” (*Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* [University of Georgia Press 2017]), whereby Middle Passage narratives, such as those in the works of Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler, become acts of forced and chosen crossings through different temporalities and subjectivities. Modifications and enhancements to the body dangle the promise of creating Black selves that are not singularly constrained by the experiences of slavery. For these authors, transhumanism becomes a conceptual and narrative tool for exploring, undermining, reclaiming, and expanding African American experiences of racism, trauma, and oppression. These themes are explored through Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) in Chapter Three, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) in Chapter Four, the Aubrey Knight trilogy (1983, 1989, 1993) in Chapter Eight, and Janelle Monaé’s oeuvre in Chapter Ten.


In my opinion, the most striking essay examines Lucille Clifton’s poetry. Bettina Judd (Chapter Seven) describes how Clifton draws on communications with oracles and spirits and from the deep unconscious to write her poems. Clifton’s spiritual practice of automatic writing is analyzed alongside Judd’s own experiments with transcribing and translating her own glossolalia (“speaking in tongues”). In exploring the impossibility of fully comprehending meaning in her own and Clifton’s glossolalia, Judd recovers the Black feminist practice of prioritizing the body as foundational to being human. In reminding readers that embodiment is a key part of being human, the essay calls attention to the ways that transhumanist attempts to modify, transcend, or enhance the human do not always occur through scientific or technological prosthetics, but also through shifts in ideology as well as bodily and spiritual practice.

One unifying theme that emerges from these essays is that Black transhumanism highlights the ways in which the human is being redistributed across new configurations of identity and body. Literary and cultural works that imagine modified, enhanced, or synthetic Black bodies offer multiple perspectives on the relationship between the human, Black subjectivity, science, and technology. They raise several crucial questions for future scholarly work on the intersections of race and technology (see also Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim* [Polity 2019]). How do transhuman, posthuman, and Afrofuturist speculations cultivate Black subjectivities and cosmologies that extend beyond white power? Does adopting, inventing, and repurposing science and technology reproduce or undermine white institutions? What abolitionist visions and tools can Black post- and transhumanism offer? The collected essays do not resolve these questions, but they certainly offer compelling frameworks rooted in literary and cultural studies for tackling them.

Within the aims and scope of this journal, these questions spotlight the rapidly changing meanings of being human within an African context. The collection’s attention to earlier works in African American literature, such as those by Pauline Hopkins (see Chapter Two), prompts me to think about

posthumanist elements in current and older works of East African literature and culture. I am thinking specifically of resurrected spirits and time travels in Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka* (Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2001) and about the post-nuclear dystopia of Euphrase Kezilahabi's *Nagona* (Dar es Salaam University Press, 1990) and *Mzingile* (Dar es Salaam University Press, 1991). Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman's recent, Burundi-situated film *Neptune Frost* (Swan Films, 2022) explores runaway cyborgs who form a computer hacker collective to overthrow an authoritarian regime. *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities* therefore sets a precedent for examining attempts to reconfigure the human in African literature and culture in ways that do not always center the West. What shapes and visions of the human are emerging through what some are calling Africanfuturism? How do they contend with the various political projects and environmental and social struggles on the continent?

This book will be of interest to students of a wide array of disciplines: Africana Studies, science and technology studies, literature, cultural studies, and history. It will be relevant particularly to scholars interested in the artistic and literary expression of African Americans and the African diaspora, but it also has broad implications for those thinking about post- and transhumanism, Afro- and Africanfuturism, and literature related to those topics.

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