

## ARTICLE

### Racial Fictions, Biological Facts: Expanding the Sociological Imagination through Speculative Methods

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#### Abstract

The facts, alone, will not save us. Social change requires novel fictions that reimagine and rework all that is taken for granted about the current structure of society. Such narratives are not meant to convince others of *what is*, but to expand our own visions of what is *possible*: *It is 2064. A reparations initiative that allows victims of police brutality to regenerate organs is well underway. A major new component of the initiative will be unveiled for the fiftieth anniversary of the Ferguson uprising, but the largest biobank in the country has been repeatedly hit by raiders intent on selling stem cells on the white market. Aiyana and her team of Risers have to find a way to secure the cell depository and revitalize the movement.* Fictions, in this sense, are not falsehoods but refashionings through which analysts experiment with speculative methods, challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability, anticipate new racial formations, and test different possibilities for creating more just and equitable societies.

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I: *The facts, alone, will not save us.*

In this moment of social crisis, where even the most basic assertion that black lives matter is contested, we are drowning in “the facts” of inequality and injustice. Whether it is a new study on criminal justice disparities or another video of police brutality, demanding empirical evidence of systematic wrongdoing can have a kind of perverse quality—as if subjugated people must petition again and again for admission into the category of “human,” for which empathy is rationed and applications are routinely denied.

In this context, novel fictions that reimagine and rework all that is taken for granted about the current structure of the social world—alternatives to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—are urgently needed. Fictions, in this sense, are not falsehoods but refashionings through which analysts experiment with different scenarios, trajectories, and reversals, elaborating new values and testing different possibilities for creating more just and equitable societies. Such fictions are not meant to convince others of *what is*, but to expand our own visions of what is *possible*.

This is not to say that imagining alternatives is sufficient, or that all things possible are even desirable. But how will we know if we do not routinely push the boundaries of our own thinking, which includes the stories we tell about the social world? In the words of historian Robin D. G. Kelley,

We must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream...Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must *transform us*. (Kelley, 2003, p. xii; my emphasis)

Building upon this insight, the following narrative sketch is an experiment to know things differently, a way to reflect anew upon the themes of my research—innovation, inequity, biotechnology, and race among them—and, ultimately, to explore the relationship between racial fictions and

biological facts. How do narratives about the inherent difference between groups impact social policies and normative practices? Does a focus on treating disparities in health support *or* substitute for broader social transformations? How might we reimagine the relationship between social and biological processes in a way that is non-deterministic, but still take seriously how inequality gets under the skin causing premature death? In short, how is race “simultaneously *factual* and *fictional*” (M’charek 2013, my emphasis)?

It is with these sorts of questions in mind that I finished my first book, *People’s Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier* (Benjamin, 2013), which examines the social implications of biotechnology through the prism of the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative. Toward the end of the revision process, I was finally able to articulate the tension that stands at the heart of the book: *Why is it that we can imagine growing cardiac cells in a lab, but not growing empathy for other human beings in our everyday lives?* For many people, the idea that we can defy politics as usual and channel human ingenuity toward more cooperative and inclusive forms of social organization is utterly farfetched. Thus I am convinced that we must query this faith in biological regeneration that stands alongside an underdeveloped investment in social transformation. *If our bodies can regenerate, why do we perceive our body politic as so utterly fixed?* The speculative exercise below is an attempt to perceive otherwise, to hold myself accountable to the query buried in *People’s Science*, to formulate a critique of the power/knowledge nexus through narrative, and ultimately to construct new fictions, though not without their own tensions and contradictions. Throughout, it is my aim to take the notion of *sociological imagination* seriously and envisage a not-too-distant future where race, science, and subjectivity are reconfigured differently, defiantly, and hopefully.

*Your people will change.  
Your young will be more like us and ours more like you.  
Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and  
If we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies,  
We'll share those abilities with you.  
That's part of the trade.  
We're overdue for it.*  
—Octavia Butler, from *Dawn*<sup>1</sup>

## II: *Ferguson is the Future*

It is 2064. A reparations initiative that allows victims of police brutality to regenerate organs is well underway. A major new component of the initiative will be unveiled for the fiftieth anniversary of the Ferguson uprising, but the largest biobank in the country has been repeatedly hit by raiders intent on selling stem cells on the white market. Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones and her team of Risers have to find a way to secure the cell depository and revitalize the movement.<sup>2</sup>

### **Time heals?**

There it was again: "Lights, hammer, action."

Just as the lightning was about to strike, Aiyana wrestled herself awake. Chest pounding and sweat circling her neck, she struggled to make out what had happened. Footsteps overhead. Channels flipping. Smothered voices. And lightning, always lightning headed directly toward her forehead.

The Humanity+ counselor kept telling her not to worry. "Chronic dreams are perfectly normal, a symptom from the previous life. They'll fade with time. I'll just double your dose."

But it's been ten years, and they've only gotten more vivid.

“Lights, *camera*, action!” Aiyana heard it clearly this time. A film crew (or was it a SWAT team?) was shooting her while she slept. That made no sense. Unless, of course, entertainment executives had started mining people’s inner lives, piped dreams, because reality had become so unbearably stale. Gossip, fight, screw, shop, backstab, gossip, on endless repeat.

Stuffing her head under the pillow to avoid the crawl of sunlight across the room, Aiyana’s thoughts continued to drift—for all their high-tech gadgets, why hadn’t the Humanity+ engineers created a better antidote for these leftover lives? How hard could it be to develop some kinda neural vacuum to suck up memory crumbs? After all, there must be side effects to *almost* getting struck by lightning night after night. Maybe that was the point...

Just then the bank alarm vibrated across Aiyana’s wrist. A break-in attempt: the third this month. She sat up, dizzy, and hooked into her chair so fast that she knocked the stack of reGeneration flyers off her nightstand.

*Whoever said time heals*

*Never had a tumor*

*Growing inside their belly*

*Mistaken for a child.*

As many times as she read it, it was no less disturbing. Why devise such a morbid slogan for the occasion, when one meant to inspire? Dead babies, for God’s sake! The Risers really needed a new PR team. What hope, delusion, or mix of both would lead anyone to ignore the lack of movement?

Annoyed, Aiyana tapped her wrist to check on the rest of her team while she rushed out of the door. The only other people moving around Grand Avenue so early on a Saturday were the market vendors who were vying for the best spots to make it easier to unload. She could already smell the

curry potatoes simmering at the roti stand, torture when she couldn't stop for some. Soon drummers from all over the Bay would make their way over for what seemed like hours and hours of conversation without words. She faintly remembered having to pull her brother Olinga away from the circle, what seemed like three lifetimes ago.

If she had more time, Aiyana would stop by Ixchel's coffee stand, but in the distance she could see the first burst of orange and fuchsia over Lake Merritt. She pressed the accelerate option on her chair, sped over the water through downtown Oakland and over the Oscar Grant Memorial Bridge until she reached the SF BioDistrict.



### **#StemCellsMatter**

Aiyana was first to arrive as usual. She circled the perimeter a few times, ensuring all the cryotanks were secure, and collected footage from the bank's eye. As she made her way toward the atrium, she glanced out of the floor-to-ceiling windows that extended the length of the hallway. The wall near the highway exit was tagged with one of those illicit ads popping up all around the Bay:

*Are you a victim of reverse regeneration?*

*Get exactly what you deserve on the white market.*

*Two-for-one special—livers, kidneys, hearts,  
grown to order.*

*More like mass-produced using pig and cow parts*, she thought. Raiders, it seemed, were becoming more and more relentless as the fiftieth reGeneration drew closer, trying to capitalize on the fervor and anxiety surrounding the Ferguson anniversary. How long until they figured out that stem cells were not the only things being kept alive in the banks?

Aiyana glanced once more at the makeshift advertisement. The raiders' signature—two scalpels in the shape of an "X"—was missing? *Great. Now we have copycats running around selling chimera organs to anyone who either can't afford the real deal or doesn't qualify under the Reparations Act.* And copycat or not, she couldn't figure out how any of these taggers managed to avoid getting recorded.

Just then the rest of her team reeled into the atrium, already in heated debate.

"This reverse-regeneration backlash is off the rails! Even so-called allies who backed the Reparations Act are saying that the Risers have lost touch," Rekia exclaimed.

"It's desperation mixed with greed," Tamir quipped. "The worst of all possible combos." But Aiyana couldn't tell if he was talking about the raiders or the Risers, or maybe it was all the same. The line between those who hoard power and those who crave it was never clear.

"Well, I think it's more economics than ideology," Freddie interrupted. "Have you all been keeping track of white-market prices? The street value of cells is off the charts!" He had a point. And somehow, stories of people dropping dead from those chimera transplants were not driving down prices.

One thing they could agree on: It was getting harder to predict what new scheme raiders would employ. Surveillance footage turned up nothing. As Aiyana ran through a checklist of the security matrix, considering all the possible ways it could be hacked, Director Lacks rushed in to the atrium, breathless. “How could this have happened *again*?!”

Aiyana reassured her that everything had been reinforced. None of the cryotanks had been touched. All of the tissue had been accounted for, including the ErGa cell lines needed for tomorrow’s Revival ceremony.

On her way back home she took shortcuts through the SF BioDistrict, across the Oscar Grant Memorial Bridge, and over Lake Merritt, the purple-and-blue sunset above and below as it reflected on the water. Another restless night to come, memory crumbs scraping the inside of her head, forcing her awake.

### **“Wake up, wake up, wake up!”**

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Ferguson uprising, the People’s Science Council was working around the clock to revive one Mr. Eric Garner, the father of six who was choked to death by NYPD officers in 2014. Holding him in cryosleep until all the necessary procedures could be honed, the council was confident that Garner could be resuscitated without incident.

Aiyana wasn’t so sure. She hinted as much to Director Lacks, who appeared unwavering. Had the Garner family even been consulted—half a dozen grandchildren and a few great-grands? All were conspicuously silent about what the People’s Science Council had planned. Lacks, of all people, should be concerned about the need to keep kin in the know.

Lo and behold, soon after Aiyana raised the question, there was a press conference—smiling relatives, relatable scientists, a bronze bust of the soon-to-awake Garner, and a scholarship fund, followed by heart-



wrenching interviews with family members who seemed genuinely excited.

Still, Aiyana was uneasy.

Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," had served as a clarion call for five decades of movement building, so it seemed fitting that he would be revived for the anniversary. Assuming, of course, that the multiple transplants worked. A lot could go wrong. Infections, graft failure, cancers. If successful, he would be the first adult to successfully undergo Doubling—resuscitation and organ renewal. Only children had survived up until that point, and even then not without complication.

On the spectrum, Aiyana's nightly lightning strikes were barely considered side effects. But she knew better. Sometimes headaches are just headaches—but sometimes they are past lives knocking on your door. She sat up, forehead throbbing, and hooked into her chair...

### **Side effects, side affects**

Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones, killed by a Detroit SWAT team in 2010, was the only person who had survived Doubling without debilitating side effects. But she had been a child at the time, seven years old when an officer threw a flash grenade where she lay sleeping on her grandmother's couch. A reality TV crew had been shooting the raid as officers shot Aiyana in the head.

When the Council woke Aiyana up and implanted a new heart, lungs, and spine, at first there was only a minor graft rejection, which transplant specialists were able to control. But then came the seizures, blackouts, and hallucinations, usually involving a lightning strike. Being born again was more like purgatory.



But with a grant from the Humanity+ Foundation, Aiyana’s transplant team designed the Chairperson™, the first of its kind—an apparatus that maintained internal homeostasis so she no longer experienced the original side effects. It also included a number of augmentations, like the ability to hover at speeds of up to 40 miles per hour on land or water and an acute sensitivity to electrical fields, which enhanced her ability to communicate, orient to her surroundings, track things, and protect herself—the gold standard in second-life starter kits.

Mr. Garner, on the other hand, was not only an adult but the first to require multiple regenerated organs a half-century after his first life was stolen. Waking up would be just the beginning.

### **Sandra**

Aiyana was gliding up the ramp of the People’s Science Building on Mission Street when she heard someone calling her name.

“Heyyy, Madame Chairperson, wait up! Ms. Jones, wait up!” It was Sandra. “How long you think this meeting is going to take?”

“Not more than an hour, I hope. The Revival organizers have to finish setting up, so they shouldn’t keep us long.”

“As soon as it’s over, there’s something I need to tell you,” whispered Sandra.

As Aiyana and Sandra walked through the front doors, the welcome hologram seemed louder than usual, the history of the Council and its achievements on blast:

The Reparations Initiative, now in its tenth year, covers the costs of regenerative medicine for victims of police brutality. Researchers honed a technique in which they can take a mature human cell from a patient and reprogram it to create any other tissue in the body. And because the regenerated tissue is produced from a person’s own cells, they avoid complications that arise with donor cells. Over 10,000 people have undergone this suite of procedures, and nearly all have survived.

As she and Sandra sat in one of the atrium lounges waiting for the meeting to begin, Aiyana couldn’t help thinking about the early days, when news first broke about the reprogramming technique. Millions of families actually started banking their own skin cells—a kind of insurance policy.

That was before the Reparations Initiative had led to the official disbanding of police. The era of “every six hours”—children playing cops-and-robbers shot down on playgrounds; teenagers goofing off with toy guns left bleeding in department store aisles; mentally ill adults treated with multiple shots to the head, mowed down for walking, driving, breathing out of place; phones, wallets, and other objects allegedly mistaken for weapons.

Not to mention all the residual damage—the chronic stress of living under

siege. Every public school teacher assigned a police escort. Students body-slammed daily for having “too much attitude.” Classmates, terrified, pretending not to notice. Kids as young as six with chronic hypertension.

The People’s Science Council headquarters devoted an entire floor to the history of decarceration. A holographic exhibit with vintage footage from police body cams, smart phones, and TV crews played on constant loop. It always troubled Aiyana: not just the section about her own murder, but the whole idea of playing and replaying black death, the “pornography of genocide.”<sup>3</sup> Why, in fact, did we need to see to believe?

Interrupting her thoughts, the building’s voiceover continued:

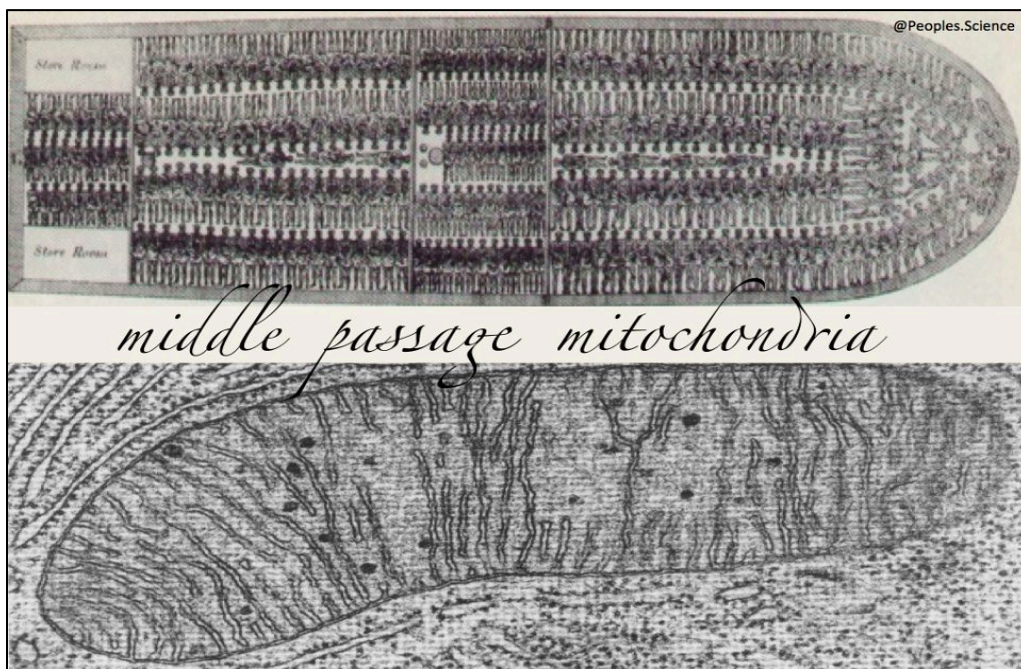
When police were forced to wear body cams in 2015, the non-indictments flowed even more freely. They were, after all, responding as they had been trained: “It was never meant to be a fair fight.” “Nonlethal force isn’t in our repertoire.” To indict individual officers would be to admit that the entire apparatus was defective.

The Ferguson Risers dubbed victims of police violence “AIs,” as in, *Attached Incident*—their way of countering the fictional notion that these were isolated acts of violence. Eventually, the staggering number of AIs created a boon for the biobanking sector. Whereas anyone who could afford it could get a transplant, only certified AIs were covered under the Reparations Act of 2025.

Slowly replacing the college funds common in the early part of the century, parents and grandparents now opened tissue accounts for their loved ones. “Don’t cell your family short! Bank with us today,” read the floating billboards. And although most of the transplant procedures were far too expensive for the average person, monthly payment plans were manageable for most families.

**Public service announcement**

*Your ancestors fueled the New World economy,  
Just as mitochondria power the cellular body.  
Harness your history, transform the biopolity!  
Come in for a free consultation to see if  
Middle Passage Mitochondria  
Is right for you.*

**Informed dissent**

Why was it taking so long for council members to come down for the meeting? Sandra, who was usually overflowing with news from the weekend, just kept looking intently in the direction of the welcome hologram. Aiyana barely noticed that she was inching closer and closer until their elbows touched.

“I can’t wait anymore. There’s something I have to tell you, Aiyana.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the sixth floor,” Sandra began.

“You mean the part they’ve been renovating since Malia Obama was president?” Aiyana said with a smirk. “What about it?”

“Well, it doesn’t need renovating.” Sandra lowered her voice even more. “That’s the raiders’ office.”

“Yeah right,” Aiyana snickered, expecting Sandra to embellish this tale and thankful for the entertainment while they waited. But Sandra wasn’t smiling. And the look in her eye caused Aiyana’s spine to tighten.

“What are you saying, Sandra?” she asked intently.

“I’m saying,” she paused, waiting for a group of students visiting the decarceration museum to shuffle by, “I’m saying that the raiders, who you’ve been chasing for three years, work for the council. Or more precisely, the council *created* the raiders...”

“But *why*?” asked Aiyana.

“Distraction,” replied Sandra.

“Distraction from *what*?” Aiyana probed. That itch, which had always told her there was more going on than Director Lacks let on, turned into a sensory rash. The nodes connecting her spine and chair pulsed so hard she could feel her lungs expanding and blood rushing to her extremities.

But before Sandra could respond, council members filed out of the elevator and toward the conference room.

“After we’re done here, meet me at the abandoned testing station on the corner of Twenty-Fourth and Mission,” Sandra whispered as they trailed in behind the group. “But go up Van Ness and use the entrance next to the



old BART platform.”

In the meeting, Aiyana turned Sandra’s words over and over. If she was right, it would explain how white-market advertisements turned up all over the city without raiders getting caught—and how, despite the resources at Aiyana’s disposal, the culprits always seemed out of reach. But, *then*, what was the real threat?

About an hour later, the meeting ended and Sandra headed out of the headquarters. Aiyana made the usual rounds, checking in with council members and updating her team about their respective tasks at the Revival. After thirty minutes, she glided out the front door toward Van Ness.

This was white-market central. Raider tags were everywhere, offering major organ discounts. As she headed towards Twenty-Fourth, her thoughts turned to the abandoned testing station where Sandra was waiting for her.



By the time the medical establishment had finally come to grips with the source of most illness, it was nearly too late...the precision medical

industry was all the rage. Their lobbyists had successfully amended Obamacare, establishing mandatory gene-testing stations alongside all clinics. Even if you just wanted your blood pressure checked, you had to get your genome mapped first—so if you didn't, forget about being treated. Couldn't afford a test? You were just out of luck.

Meanwhile, counterfeiting operations that specialized in genome maps flourished. The fact that people were buying knockoff maps to get access to treatments defeated the whole point of precision medicine. But it took another decade to establish the People's Science Council and begin addressing the chronic strain of living under siege.

We are still trying to figure out what to do with all the abandoned testing stations.

Before Aiyana turned the corner onto Twenty-Fourth, she looked behind her one more time, then went down the ramp toward the BART platform. She knocked on the metal door and, after three or four long seconds, Sandra opened it.

"Listen, we don't have much time. The Revival is tomorrow and you only have one chance to get this right."

"Get *what* right?" Aiyana probed.

"Think about it, Aiyana. When did you first hear about the raiders?"

It had been the week of the elections. And it hadn't looked like the Reparations Act was going to pass.

"Don't you think it's odd how these biobank attacks are always one step ahead? And notice how they always seem to follow the death of a transplant survivor, or at least the *public* ones that get people asking whether these 'free' procedures for police brutality victims are really what they are made out to be."



“What are you saying, Sandra?”

“Distraction! The raiders are a manufactured distraction. There is no white market. There is only the People’s Science Council honing these techniques on the backs of brutality victims ‘for free.’ Once they sort out all the kinks, the recipes are going to be patented...proprietary. And turned over to an elite group of octogenarians we’ve been tracking, the Immortocracy, who are hiding out on Alcatraz.”

“Who’s we? And what’s the Immortocracy?” Aiyana asked, impatiently.

“An elite class that has everything life has to offer, except this pesky thing called death keeps getting in the way. But so far the procedures have been too risky. They needed a long-term plan to hone them. Hence the Reparations Act, a moral prophylactic for what they really have planned.”

Aiyana sat stunned, “But, how do you ...”

Sandra cut her off, “I’ll tell you everything! But right now we don’t have time! The main thing I need you to know is that the raiders aren’t your enemy. They are a fiction. And unless we...that is, *you*, infiltrate the Revival and get a message to Mr. Garner before the curtain falls on this elaborate charade, those faux-populists at the People’s Science headquarters win. Their patent relies on Garner’s successful Doubling. As long as he plays his part, parroting the script they give him—a celebrity spokesman for their immortality products—the Revival will usher in a new caste system.”

### ***What do we owe each other?***

He stood on the stage, the applause turning to a hum as Dr. Lacks began her introduction. Eric twisted in his suit ever so slightly, the lining loose in places, bunching in others. *Rushed*, he thought. Everything was rushed. Death. Life. And now this three-piece suit. Not even his style. But the

grandkids seemed so excited that he couldn't say no. So there he stood, with an inner lining doing what it wanted.

Trying to ignore the discomfort, he glanced once more at the script his handler made him practice. "Special thanks to the People's Science Council for organizing this incredible Revival; the mayor of San Francisco, Brisenia Flores; the director of the Trayvon Martin Biobank, Dr. Henrietta Lacks, and all the sponsors—synthMed, fauxHead, realLimb, eLung..." Just then, thunderous applause erupted in AT&T Park. He was up.

Mr. Garner smiled and waved just as his handler had reminded him. He took a sip of water, and stared down at the script *with* his new heart beating loudly. *Murdered by the hands of police, born again by the hands of scientists*, he thought, *both without asking*.

Off-script, he began: *Who will pay reparations on my soul?*<sup>4</sup>

### III: *Imagination and Extinction*

*There is never time in the future  
in which we will work out our salvation.*

*The challenge is in the moment.*

*The time is always now.*

-James Baldwin<sup>5</sup>

While a growing body of work explores the relationship between social science and fiction (see, for example, Carrigan, 2015; Leavy, 2015; Nova, 2013a and 2013b; Bleecker, 2009; de Casonova, 2016; Forlano, 2013; Tutton, 2016; Watson, 2016), W. E. B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet" (1920) offers one of the earliest experiments with what I am calling speculative methods. Set in a dystopian world where the racial status quo is momentarily overturned, it underscores the importance of storytelling in scholarly and civic praxis. The direct link Du Bois crafted between sociology and speculative fiction suggests the need for windows into

alternative realities, even if it is just a glimpse, to challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability as they relate to both technology and society (Phillips, 2015). Stories remind us that the beginning, middle, and end could all be otherwise: “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” (Imarisha, 2015, p. 3).

Similarly, Ursula Le Guin’s 2014 National Book Awards acceptance speech encourages a more deliberate use of fiction in fostering social change:

I think hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom. Poets, visionaries—the realists of a larger reality. (quoted in Arons, 2014)

Social scientists, for our part, are often in the business of documenting dystopias, which offer a starting point for imagining alternatives. For example, the following anthropological texts on the relationship between science, medicine, and inequality help to shape the narrative in “Ferguson is the Future.” Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s work on organ trafficking describes practices that she calls “stranger than fiction” (2002, p. 36): *What if* the race, class, and gender inequalities that are so foundational to the structural violence she observes were reversed? As one of Scheper-Hughes’s informants says, “Poor people like ourselves are losing our organs to the state, one by one!” (p. 37). But what if, instead of complicit government officials, the state was positioned as benefactor? And what if the subaltern were positioned as beneficiary? What could we learn by using similar guiding questions as those who study organ trafficking *empirically* to reflect on the social world *speculatively*? That is, asking, in Scheper-Hughes’s words, “*What is going on here? What truths are being served? Whose needs are being privileged? Whose voices are being silenced? What invisible sacrifices are being demanded? What secrets are being concealed in the transplant rhetoric of gifts, altruism,*

scarcities and needs?” (p. 35). While I have not yet begun to answer all of these in the story sketched above, one can observe how they motivate the narrative insofar as the straightforward “gifts” of the People’s Science Council are not all that they seem.

Similarly, anthropologist Adriana Petryna’s *Life Exposed* (2003) informs an understanding of the struggle for medical inclusion and citizenship in the context of systemic inequality. In many ways, the plot of “Ferguson Is the Future” can be understood as the result of a particular demand for biological citizenship, where reparations come in the form of regenerated body parts and a second life. The process of writing this world is also a response to the problem Petryna articulates around how we come to know or *not know* the facts about injury and violence. She describes the inadequacies of producing such knowledge, saying that “the heterogeneous facts of living that make up survivors’ stories of death and recovery have nowhere to live under dominant systems of knowledge” (p. xvi), systems of knowledge such as bureaucratic record-keeping and statistical representations. In part, this is a call for new modes of representation and engagement that exceed the traditional bounds of academia—expanding what counts as knowledge.

Finally, anthropologist Laurence Ralph argues that even amid the many layers of state, structural, and internalized violence that endanger black lives, people stubbornly and creatively produce meaning and exercise agency. Like Petryna, Ralph illustrates that it can be “politically strategic to inhabit the role of a ‘defective body’ in order to make claims about a violent society” (2012). Considering the ethnographic narrative in *Renegade Dreams* (Ralph, 2014): If we placed Justin (the main protagonist, who was paralyzed after a gang-related drive-by shooting) inside the world of “Ferguson is the Future,” he would *not*, in fact, be eligible for spinal regeneration under the Reparations Act. One’s eligibility for repair is, after all, circumscribed around a narrow definition of state violence that comes from the direct action of police. In this speculative world, as it often is in the present, injury that is a result of structural violence is not legible under the law. Ghettoization, which, in many ways,

fosters gang affiliation, produces its own forms of injury that are not entitled to redress—not in the world of Eastwood, Chicago, that Ralph depicts nor in the world of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, where only victims of police violence may obtain free transplants. Even the seeming beneficence of the latter is no straightforward “good,” since the freedom to be experimented upon can only be depicted as such if one’s life chances are already violently restricted.

The theme of regeneration, in short, connects with anthropological and activist concerns about extinction. Consider all of the ways that imperiled black lives are invoked and deployed, and not always with the aim of remediation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a philosophy of extinction is embedded in the very fabrication of racial taxonomies. To be racialized is to be, by definition, “in danger” from politically engineered forces that are then euphemized as biological facts of degeneracy. Consider ethnographer and statistician James Barnard describing Australian Aborigines in 1890:

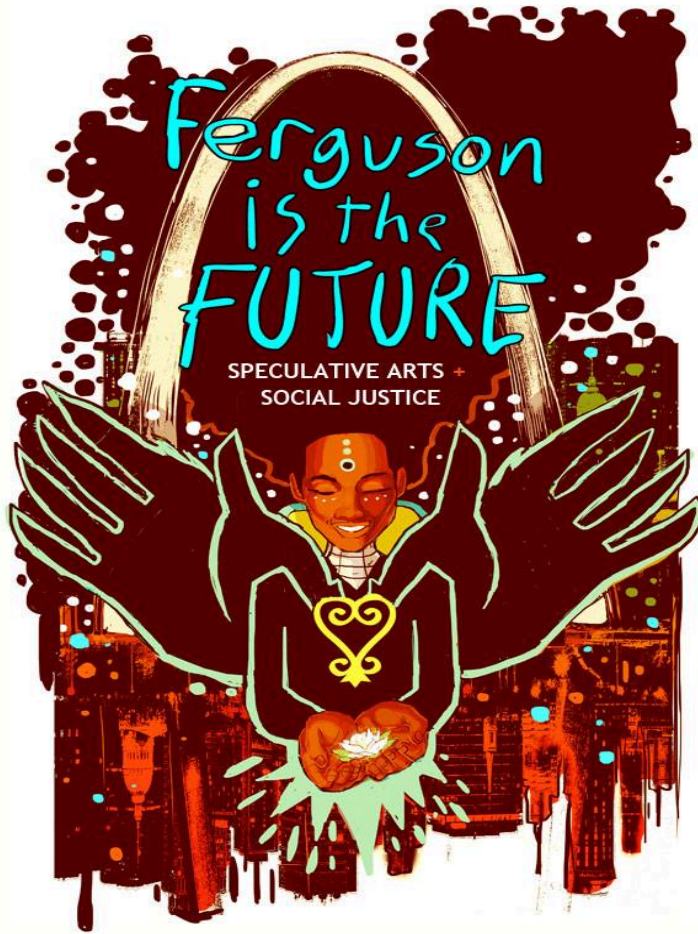
It has become an axiom that, following the law of evolution and survival of the fittest, the inferior races of mankind must give place to the highest type of man, and that this law is adequate to account for the gradual decline in numbers of the aboriginal inhabitants of a country before the march of civilization. (quoted in McGregor, 1993)

Evolutionary euphemisms—their own kind of retrospective fiction—displace narratives that reckon truthfully with the genocidal violence that forced aboriginals to “give way.” Similarly, US eugenicist and amateur anthropologist Madison Grant wrote, in *The Passing of the Great Race*,

A rigid system of selection through the elimination of those who are weak or unfit—in other words social failures—would solve the whole question in one hundred years, as well as enable us to get rid of the undesirables who crowd our jails, hospitals, and insane asylums...[T]he state through sterilization must see to it that his line stops with him, or else future generations will be cursed with an ever-increasing load of misguided sentimentalism. This is a practical, merciful, and inevitable solution of the whole problem, and

can be applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased, and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives, and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types. (Grant, 1916, p. 28)

As philosopher David Theo Goldberg aptly notes, the impulse to eliminate racial threats is often euphemized as “natural preservation... [T]he self-licensing to purge a racially framed people as a “natural” entailment of human self-preservation—is politically projected in specific social contexts” (2015, p. 138). If we liken race to a technology that creates parallel universes and premature death, then racism is in the business of “manufacturing natures” (Benjamin, 2016)—that is, biological facts that legitimate racial narratives of dominance and inferiority. To say that race is a technology is also to insist that racism is innovative and future-oriented, which implies that *antiracisms* are often playing catch-up, caught off guard by new “killer apps” that come to market. Which is why, coming full circle, I suggest that it is vital to experiment with speculative methods so that analysts and activists alike may better anticipate and intervene in new racial formations that, like the “Ferguson is the Future” reparations policy, may appear to be a kind of radical intervention but may very well entail their own logics of extinction.



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only to commemorate their lives, but to open a space for these tragedies to hasten collective struggle for justice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Butler, 1988, p. 40

<sup>2</sup> All images in manuscript are reproduced with permission from their creators.

Image 1: By Paul Sableman. Source: Flickr. Image reproduced through Creative Commons.

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Image 3: Cellular Memory, Social Amnesia, by Ruha Benjamin. The author juxtaposed two well-circulated images to form “Middle Passage Mitochondria.” For the slave ship graphic, see Bristol Museum, 2014, and Labarre, 2012.

Image 4: “UFO House in Taiwan” by Phillip Christyakov. Reproduced with permission from photographer. Source:  
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Image 5: By John Jennings, commissioned and titled “Hands Up, We Fly” by Ruha Benjamin

<sup>3</sup> See Thrasher, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Garner’s words in the story echo the title of an essay by McCarthy, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, 1998, p. 214



<sup>6</sup> For example, pro-life billboard advertisements that read, “The most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb,” are an egregious co-optation of the language of endangerment (Robbins, 2011).

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