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Session Four Paper

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Writing this paper in the weeks before a life-changing election, and in the days immediately after, the various dystopian futures envisioned in speculative fiction (SF) seem chillingly real - if not, in many cases, downright quaint - and SF's imagined forms of resistance seem horribly relevant. But not all speculative visions of community resistance are equally relevant to those of us who seek to accompany our spiritual communities through times of extreme hardship and new forms of oppression.

Faced with climate collapse, "love fests" of hate and violence, all-pervasive surveillance, Muskian techno-fascism, epistemological doubt and ontological dismantling, some contemporary speculative fiction authors offer us relief through fantasy, including time travel, magic, superheroes, technological cure-alls, and deus-ex-machina devices such as sentient bacteria that feed on White supremacist greed[1]. Important as this kind of fantasy may be, these works don't do much in terms of providing models for religious communities seeking to thrive in the face of apocalypse.

It's within a subset of speculative fiction, what Walidah Imarisha calls "visionary fiction" or "science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds"[2] that religious communities can find useful models of resistance and liberation. Of course, no single model will apply in all contexts, and each has its own drawbacks.

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[1] See Gabby Rivera, "0.1," *A People's Future of the United States* (PFUS).

[2] Imarisha, "Introduction," *Octavia's Brood* (OB), 3.

One of visionary fiction's most common tropes is a primal response to existential assault: the response of flight. In speculative fiction, this may take the form of escaping a dying planet or oppressive regime.[3] Within our communities, of course, we have long experienced flight, in the form of traumatized congregants disappearing rather than staying with the trouble[4] of congregational conflict. More recently, though, red state congregations have witnessed targeted groups (trans individuals and their families, for example) fleeing to safer locations. Clearly, flight is often a necessary mechanism for survival, but when applied to entire communities it inevitably brings up issues of privilege (not everyone is able/ allowed to flee) and escape alone is not a theologically-grounded approach to collective liberation.

One theme within visionary fiction that feels particularly familiar within the context of many UU communities is the trope of entrenchment, or the building of isolated and protected, identity-based groups.[5] Here, I'm not talking about caucusing, or the temporary gathering of individuals based on shared identity for the purpose of mutual support and authentic communication prior to reengaging with others across difference. The kinship-based communities of speculative

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[3] Examples of works focusing on flight: jaye simpson, "The Ark of the Turtle's Back," *Love After the End* (LATE); Mari Kurisato, "Seed Children" (LATE); Jelani Wilson "22XX: One-Shot" (OB).

[4] See Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*: "[S]taying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings." (1)

[5] Examples of community isolation in speculative fiction include Adam Garnet Jones, "History of the New World" (LATE); Kai Minosh Pyle, "How to Survive the Apocalypse for Native Girls" (LATE); Autumn Brown, "Small and Bright" (OB); Mia Mingus, "Hollow" (OB). Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* might be included here, as it is the robots' self-isolation that allows humans to build their own idyllic, solarpunk society. Charlie Jane Anders in "The Bookstore at the End of America" (PFUS) takes two isolated communities and puts them right up against each other in the form of a single bookstore with two sides. Lizz Huerta in "The Wall" (PFUS) and Daniel Wilson in "A History of Barbed Wire" (PFUS) show how places of exile can become places of sanctuary. Seanan McGuire in "Harmony" (PFUS) provides one example of a place of sanctuary becoming a truly open, utopian community.

fiction are, rather, segregated groupings that go beyond the exigency of temporary sanctuary. While serving as an effective means of survival for marginalized and oppressed groups, these isolated communities come with their own problems. As a character in Kai Minosh Pyle's story "How to Survive the Apocalypse for Native Girls" puts it, "Kinship is a two-sided coin… You always gotta ask yourself, who is being excluded here?"[6] In other words, any community based solely on "likeness" (e.g. "like-mindedness" as a common refrain within UU communities) must inevitably exclude some who are judged to be "not like enough."

Finding meaning in legacy or in the survival of stories emerges as a recurring mode of resistance in "visionary" speculative fiction.[7] Tales in which stories are written on the body, in scars or in ink, serve as reminders that real communication "is not possible without wounding, without loss."[8] Giving voice to the voiceless and telling the stories that are threatened by erasure is an act of defiance that is not without risk, and it is a form of resistance that seems deeply appropriate to our spiritual communities. And yet, it isn't enough to honor ancestors or tell the stories of the oppressed. These actions help to ensure survival, but don't necessarily lead to collective liberation or transformation on their own.

Finally, over and over in visionary speculative fiction, we find underground resistance as a community response to oppression, techno-fascism, and genocide.[9] This makes perfect sense as, historically, underground resistance movements have

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[6] Pyle, "How to Survive the Apocalypse for Native Girls," *Love After the End*, 87.

[7] Examples include Gabriel Castilloux Calderon, "Andwanikadjigan" (LATE); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Evidence" (OB); Morrigan Phillips, "The Long Memory" (OB); Maria Dahvana Headley "Read After Burning" (PFUS).

[8] Sarduy, *Written on a Body*, 41.

[9] Examples include Merc Rustad, "Our Aim Is Not to Die" (PFUS); Lesley Nneka Arimah, "The Referendum" (PFUS); Justina Ireland, "Calendar Girls" (PFUS); N.K. Jemisin, "Give Me Cornbread or Give Me Death" (PFUS).

been effective underminers of oppressive regimes. In some cases, such guerrilla resistance is an important harbinger and component of outright revolution. In other cases, it is merely a way for oppressed groups not to die. In the face of rising Christian Nationalism, it seems likely that a key role for our progressive religious communities will be participation in underground networks of resistance, including both covert actions of defiance and clandestine networks of care. Both history and visionary speculative fiction provide us with models of effective underground movements that put endangered communities at the center and assume an ethic of risk. But both also offer cautionary tales of movements that fall apart or of treachery that occurs when those in positions of relative safety back down out of fear of having too much to lose.

There is one more model of communal resistance that speculative fiction provides us as ministers and as members of religious communities that, I believe, is fully grounded within our liberal and relational theology. While escape, separation, remembrance, and underground resistance are all practical means of survival in the face of dystopian violence, oppression, manipulation, and outright annihilation, speculative fiction offers a vision of community life that goes beyond survival and points in the direction of transformation. This engine of transformation was a central theme throughout Octavia Butler's work, and we find it within many of the works of her spiritual and artistic descendants, including Afrofuturist, Africanfuturist, and feminist and womanist writers of color such as Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, Rivers Solomon, and Larissa Lai. This engine of transformation and collective liberation is symbiogenesis, evolution through symbiosis, through the radical proximity or merging of previously separate beings. In this speculative vision, salvation comes not through Darwinian competition but through collaboration, through symbiosis: interdependent beings abiding together as one, creating something new, something larger than the sum of their parts.

During the remainder of my presentation, in the spirit of symbiosis, my written words will be supplemented with video images. This will include a recording of a work called "Symbiosis," created and performed by the collaborative dance company Pilobolus at the TED conference in 2005, preceded by an animation of process painter Shoshanah Dubliner's work titled "Endosymbiosis: Homage to Lynn Margulis." I hope that these images and my words will connect in symbiotic fashion, to create meaning that exceeds the sum of its parts.

In exploring the theme of symbiogenesis in speculative fiction and its relevance for communities of faith, we might begin with the work of evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis. In the face of mockery and the disdain of her male colleagues, in 1967, Margulis postulated an alternative vision of evolution, what became accepted as the theory of endosymbiosis.[10] According to this theory, eukaryotic cells (or cells with a nucleus, bound by a membrane), evolved out of the enfolding of one bacteria-like organism within another such organism. At some point, an organism with the ability to photosynthesize, to produce sugars from sunlight, was ingested – but not digested - by another organism, through the process of phagocytosis.[11] In the same way, a cell that could utilize oxygen in the creation of energy became enfolded within a larger cell. Within this larger organism, the photosynthetic cells became chloroplasts. The oxidizing cells became mitochondria. Even now, what appears as one eukaryotic cell contains diverse strains of DNA. One cell contains within it the legacy of separate individuals abiding together in the deepest way possible.

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[10] Endosymbiosis is a specific type of symbiosis in which a symbiont lives within the body of its partner.

[11] For a process theology-based discussion of ingestion and digestion, see Pohl, *A Theology of the Microbiome*, 82.

In later works, Margulis would go on to point out that endosymbiosis wasn't just a fluke of evolution; in her book, *Symbiotic Planet*, she clarified that symbiosis is everywhere. "Not only are our guts and eyelashes festooned with bacterial and animal symbionts, but if you look at your backyard or community park, symbionts…are omnipresent. …[T]ake the trees, the maple, oak, and hickory. As many as three hundred different fungal symbionts, the mycorrhizae we notice as mushrooms, are entwined in their roots. Or look at a dog, who usually fails to notice the symbiotic worms in his gut. We are symbionts on a symbiotic planet… Physical contact is a nonnegotiable requisite for many differing kinds of life."[12]

Margulis never argued that competition plays no role in evolution but, for her, the greater evolutionary force was the binding together of independent lives into a new wholeness. In this binding, the histories of the individuals are not lost (mitochondria maintains separate DNA from the larger cell) but they become radically interdependent. This kind of merger is closer to what we experience in the UU Flower Ceremony (where, within the larger bouquet, we can still make out the individual flowers) as opposed to the Water Ceremony (where all the water really does merge into one indistinguishable substance).

Collaborative, community evolution through symbiosis was a dominant theme throughout Octavia Butler's work (including her *Patternist* and *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* series, as well as stand-alone novels like *Fledgling* and short works like "Bloodchild") and we can find it in the works of contemporary SF authors who are influenced by Butler, including Nnedi Okorafor and N.K. Jemisin.[13] In these texts, survival isn't just a matter of isolating, escaping, remembering, or even resisting through underground defiance or through violent

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[12] Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 5-6.

[13] It's worth noting that this theme also appears in popular SF television shows, from *Star Trek Voyager's* symbiont Trills to the human-animal hybrids of *Sweet Tooth*.

revolution. It's a matter of evolving through radically deep, symbiotic relationships.

In the very last interview Octavia Butler gave before her death, Butler said, "I think symbiosis has always been something that fascinated me … I've read a lot of biology, I'm fascinated by it, and I was so happy, I remember, to find Lynn Margulis, a biologist who talks about symbiogenesis, the evolution by symbiosis, by coming together as opposed to evolution by conflict and the strongest wins and that kind of thing. … She's talking mainly about microorganisms, but still, it's true, I think with people as well as some animals and microorganisms, on many levels, we wind up being strengthened by what we join, or what joins us, as well as by what we combat."[14]

While symbiosis is a theme that runs throughout Butler's oeuvre, I'll focus on just one of her works, *Dawn*, originally published in 1987, the first novel in her *Xenogenesis* series (later bound together as *Lilith's Brood*). *Dawn* may offer one of Butler's most obvious explorations of symbiosis as an evolutionary response to existential crisis. I'll also take a look at two more recent SF works in which symbiosis plays a significant role: *Lagoon* (2014) by the Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020).

In Butler's *Dawn*, the protagonist, a 26-year-old Black woman named, significantly, Lilith (Adam's first wife, according to Jewish folklore) wakes up on an alien spaceship 250 years after the human species on Earth has been almost entirely obliterated, primarily through active self-destruction. The beings who have taken her in, along with a small group of fellow survivors, are the Oankali, creatures with some humanoid features but with many disturbing characteristics, such as sensory organs that appear as tentacles or slithering snakes. The Oankali

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[14] House, *Octavia E. Butler: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 167.

have three genders (male, female and Ooloi), they claim to live beyond hierarchies, and their only means of long-term survival is through recurrent genetic and cultural merger with other species (a form of symbiogenesis). The Ooloi play a pivotal, intermediary role in reproduction, both between Oankali males and females, and among the Oankali and the other species with whom they merge. Lilith is tasked with waking up her fellow human beings and preparing them for a new way of life on a regenerated Earth, where humans and Oankali will live in radical proximity, eventually merging into a new kind of being, and a new kind of community, to repopulate the planet.

Much of the book is concerned with the humans' repulsion and staunch opposition to the idea that their children will be something other than "pure" human. Lilith herself is at first appalled by the idea, but she is also realistic about humans' dependence on the Oankali. Not only are the Oankali (through the Ooloi) capable of giving great pleasure to their human partners but they offer extremely advanced technology (even their ship – a living being – exists in a symbiotic relationship with the Oankali). Furthermore, their anti-hierarchical way of being stands in stark contrast to the humans who wake up asking "who's in charge?" and picking fights, even attempting to kill their assigned Ooloi, out of fear of the loss of binary genders and species "purity." At the same time, Butler pushes back against the dangerous mythology of "hybrid vigor" as manifested in American eugenics, in which one species (one race) is "made better" through merger with a "superior" species (race).[15] By the end of the book, Lilith is pregnant with a child produced with another human but through the intervention of her Ooloi. It is

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[15] For more on the complexity of "hybrid vigor," see: House, *Octavia E. Butler: The Last Interview: and Other Conversations*, p. 168; and Hector Mojena, "'Hybrid Vigor': Embracing the Fragmented Nation in Cuban Science Fiction" https://hector-mojena.squarespace.com/the-missouri-review/2017/8/10/hybrid-vigor-embracing-the-fragmented-nation-in-cuban-science-fiction. Tara Betts in "Runway Blackout" (OB) imagines interracial shapeshifters who refuse to abandon their Black identity, a form of resistance against racist "hybrid vigor."

uncertain whether her child will be human or something other than (or more than) human.

While symbiogenesis between humans and Oankali (genetic as well as cultural enfoldment) offers a compelling means of both survival and evolution, Butler doesn't present the relationship as utopian in any sense. The symbiotic relationship is constantly in danger of tipping from mutualistic to parasitic, with the Oankali clearly holding the most power. This is not a master/slave relationship (as some critics have claimed and as Butler herself denied) but it isn't egalitarian, either. Butler makes clear that power dynamics don't just disappear even when two different entities merge at a deep level (here, there might be some interesting comparisons to the Unitarians and Universalists). This is the challenge and the relevance of her work. Transformative and evolutionary communities are not "melting pots" and they are not sites of agreement and perfect equality. They are composed of individuals, some with (historically) more power and some with less power, and the legacy of oppressive relationships is always present. There is no rest for either party in Butler's work. Both must be constantly working for greater mutualism, avoiding falling into parasitism, commensalism, or amensalism.[16]

Nnedi Okorafor is a Nigerian-American writer of Africanfuturist young adult and adult SF. In her 2015 novel *Lagoon*, aliens land in the water near the Nigerian city of Lagos. They seem to be drawn there specifically because of Lagos's already symbiotic nature – as manifested in the constant interaction, merging, and mutual transformation of different religions, cultures, and languages. Okorafor describes Bar Beach (the site of the aliens' arrival) as "a perfect sample of Nigerian society. It was a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land, and the wealthy mixed

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[16] Commensalism, amensalism, parasitism, and mutualism are different forms of symbiosis. In commensalism, one "partner" benefits and the other is unaffected. In amensalism, one is harmed and there is no effect on the other. In parasitism, one symbiont benefits from the relationship and the other is harmed. In mutualism, both organisms benefit from the relationship.

with the poor. Bar Beach attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children, and their careless parents."[17]

Although Lagos offers the potential of true symbiosis, of creative symbiogenesis, Okorafor's characters are hopelessly individualistic and plagued by hierarchical thinking. The alien protagonist, on the other hand, describes herself as a collective: "Every part of us, every tiny universe within us is conscious. I am we, I am me."[18]

Ultimately, in a section of the book titled "Symbiosis," the aliens merge their consciousness with humans, with the suggestion that this queering of difference will offer a new way of being beyond capitalism or binary categories, including the human/non-human binary. As in Butler's *Dawn*, though, symbiosis is far from an easy process. It is marked by violent resistance against and exotic attraction to otherness and by legacies of dominance that persist over time.[19]

Symbiotic models in N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* may be less overt than in these other works, but we can draw a parallel between Margulis's description of endosymbiosis, in which discernible entities co-exist within a radically interdependent system or complex organism, and the way that the five

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[17] Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 5.

[18] Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 266.

[19] It is notable that in Okorafor's *Lagoon*, River Solomon's *The Deep*, and Larissa Lam's *Salt Fish Girl*, the site of symbiogenesis is water, perhaps a recognition of the original location of symbiotic evolution on Earth, a reflection of the generative nature of symbiotic relationships within community. In *Dawn*, *Lagoon*, *The Deep*, and *Salt Fish Girl*, the aquatic and the tentacular are imbued with symbiogenetic force. In Jemisin's *The City We Became*, on the other hand, it is the Enemy who smells of the deep sea and who brings devastation and colonization through its alien tentacles. This anomaly, I believe, is because of Jemisin's desire to equate the pestilent enemy with the White supremacist xenophobia of HP Lovecraft and his cthulhu mythos. The sea itself remains a site of symbiogenesis, as we can see in the novel's final scene, in which New York and the five boroughs (with Jersey City taking the place of Staten Island) appear together, playing in the water of Coney Island, in symbiotic wholeness.

embodied boroughs become a collective (or not – in the case of Staten Island) that is "consumed" by the "eukaryotic cell" (the primary avatar) of New York City. In highlighted opposition to the city of London, the boroughs of New York are not digested by the larger city; they ARE New York and yet each maintains their own unique strengths and qualities, their own unique "DNA." Here, again, we might find an interesting parallel to the UU Flower Ceremony, which celebrates unique identities within radical interdependence.[20]

The absorption or enfolding of "newcomers" into the organism of New York is a theme that runs throughout Jemisin's novel. Newcomers are welcome, even required for the city to persist as a complex, dynamic being, but only if they truly *want* to be a part of the larger entity, and only if what they bring with them is authentic. Describing the generative mechanism of symbiogenesis, Lynn Margulis wrote, "A major theme of the microbial drama is the emergence of individuality from the community interactions of once-independent actors."[21] Along these same lines, in Jemisin's novel, the city of New York is born from the community interactions of individuals with their own cultures and histories. As the Woman in White complains:

> "You eat each other's cuisines and learn new techniques, new spice combinations, trade for new ingredients; you grow stronger. You wear each other's fashions and learn new patterns to apply to your lives, and because of it you grow stronger. Even just one new language infects you with a radically different way of thinking! Why, in just a few thousand years you've gone from being unable to count to understanding the quantum universe – and you'd have made it there

[20] As adrienne maree brown notes, "On so many levels, interdependence requires being seen, as much as possible, as your true self" (*Emergent Strategy*, 93).

[21] Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 10-11.

> faster if you didn't keep destroying each other's cultures and having to start over from scratch."[22]

Here, Jemisin specifically alludes to "hybrid vigor," but in this case, the strength obtained through symbiosis isn't eugenic "improvement" but evolution through sustained proximate differences. In fact, we learn that what brings cities to life is the layering of differences (what the Woman in White describes as an "algal mat" with many nuclei) and what threatens them is the soulless homogeneity of corporate entities, like the Starbucks monsters that attack the protagonists or the more insidious monster of gentrification.

In her book, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, process theologian Monica Coleman writes that "Black women's science fiction can change the world" by calling out current injustice and offering future possibilities for a more just society, which includes the empowerment of women and the thriving of Black and other marginalized people. But these texts also reflect a womanist, open, and relational process theology in which communities seek "to survive in a dangerous world while sharing a belief in the symbiotic relationship between God and the world."[23]

Coleman provides an in-depth analysis of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as an illustration of womanist SF theology. She notes that the novel's protagonist, the leader of a utopian community called Earthseed, has an unusual condition, hyperempathy, which "allows her to maintain her own self in the experience of radical relationality while incorporating the world around her and transforming it into a community." Coleman goes on to wonder, "What if

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[22] Jemisin, *The City We Became*, 342.

[23] Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, location 3580.

hyperempathy was normative? What if it was the goal we all strive to achieve? We would all be tied together."[24]

A symbiotic lens allows us to see that hyperempathy can indeed be normative within nature: organelles with separate DNA are tied together within the eukaryotic cell; mycorrhizae are tied together with trees; trillions of bacteria, viruses, protists, archaea and fungi are tied together with and within the human gut; and on and on. Womanist SF writers like Butler, Okorafor, and Jemisin show us what this might look like within human (and non-human) communities in which symbionts can honestly and literally say to one another – in the words of a beloved gospel song – "I need you to survive."

In a time of deep social divides, toxic conflict, violence, rising fascism and climate catastrophe, visionary speculative fiction offers models for community response with varying degrees of relevance for our spiritual communities or congregations, including flight, isolation, a focus on legacy, and resistance (both underground activism and violent revolution). But some authors, like Butler, Okorafor, and Jemisin, present an alternative that bears special meaning for spiritual communities, based in a relational theology: a model for how to (in Donna Haraway's words) "stay with the trouble." These texts go beyond a speculative vision of change to emphasize the evolutionary potential of "change with" or "becoming with."

What makes them so relevant to our ministries is, despite their categorization as speculative, their utter realism. Just as in our communities, the enfolded, symbiotic relationships in these novels exist always in a state of tension. Old power dynamics are not simply erased, they must be contended with constantly. The entwining and enfolding of identities are not devoid of histories or

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[24] Coleman, location 3880.

legacies of White supremacy, patriarchy, or other forms of oppression. Slippage into parasitism is always a possibility. And radical interdependence (living with and within) is also always living on the edge, as it is an existential threat to the powers that be.

In the work by Pilobolus called "Symbiosis," we see dancers who mimic the process of separate beings merging, becoming something new, reproducing through cell division, and merging with other beings into something yet again new. Likewise, in the novels of Butler, Okorafor, and Jemisin, separate entities, including beings from entirely different cultures and entirely different universes, struggle, come together, and, without losing their own recognizable attributes, become something "beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine."[25] This process is a dance, but it is an extremely awkward dance. One that sometimes seems marked by violence and power struggles and sometimes by erotic attraction. One in which sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between enfolding and digesting. This is the same awkward dance that we as ministers and religious leaders are invited to nurture within our spiritual communities. Especially now. Especially at a time that demands genesis, that demands evolution.

The delicate balance between enfolding and digesting (in a community context, we might say assimilating) points back to the origin of symbiogenesis, which is hunger. The earliest endosymbiotic evolution was not a result of Edenic comfort. It was a result of crisis, of extreme need, of one being coming radically close to another, even enfolding another *for the purpose of surviving*. The first bacteria-like organism that engulfed an "oxygen-eating" organism did not intend to create mitochondria. That result would have been a magnificent surprise, both for

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[25] brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 13.

the two separate entities now existing as one and, as process theologians would remind us, even for God.

Similarly, in much speculative fiction (but perhaps especially in the work of Octavia Butler), it is crisis that sparks evolution. The situation in Butler's *Dawn* bears an uncanny connection to our present circumstance in the United States. In that novel, the destruction of humanity seems largely self-imposed, driven by hierarchy-driven conflict but also, it seems, by a desire to just "burn it all down." It is that unimaginable loss, however, that allows for even the possibility of symbiotic merger across universes of difference. That kind of leap requires an extreme hunger for survival. I propose that our communities are now faced with that same kind of hunger, which may well open the door for forms of deep collaboration, even cultural and organizational symbiogenesis, that might have been unimaginable in friendlier times.

But symbiogenesis does not occur in a vacuum. Lynn Margulis, writing about the emergence of eukaryotic organisms with oxygen-eating symbionts, points out that this new form of life could only come about on the shoulders of death. "The oxygen we need to breathe began as a toxin; it still is. The oxygen released from millions of cyanobacteria resulted in a holocaust… The cyanobacteria's waste became our fresh air."[26]

As the novels of Butler, Okorafor, and Jemisin remind us, the emergence of new ways of being always represents a threat to old ways. In *The City We Became*, this is quite literal, as symbiotic, living cities emerge only by "punching through" other universes. As Bronca, the embodiment of the Bronx, describes it, "The process of our creation, what makes us alive, is the deaths of hundreds or

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[26] Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 121.

thousands of other closely related universes."[27] Given this, it makes sense that the Enemy, the Woman in White, sees the emergent city as something that must be destroyed before it can be born.

This is our reality as well, made painfully manifest with this election but beginning countless years before – old, White supremacist, patriarchal, binary universes have been creating the toxic waste that will eventually lead to their own devastation, even as they struggle to prevent the emergence of a new life punching through.[28]

But the symbiotic evolution of a single cell, a single City, a single community doesn't only depend upon that which has died. "Nothing living lives alone."[29] In *Lagoon*, the symbiotic evolution of Lagos triggers change in Chicago. In *The City We Became*, New York relies on Hong Kong and Sao Paolo for its birth. Each new organism exists within a larger system of already complex organisms, held within a network of other beings that are dying and coming to life, all of them interacting indirectly through feedback loops that create and sustain (or deconstruct) systems. This is the sympoiesis of queer ecology, a fluid "becoming with" or co-creation between organisms and identities, a relationship of relationships. This is the emergence upon which adrienne maree brown and others biomimetically build a strategy of change.

In this moment of crisis, we, as leaders and lovers of spiritual communities, are faced with an existential challenge: how will we make our way through this valley of the shadow of death? Certainly, in the short-term, and perhaps for much

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[27] Jemisin, *The City We Became*, 306.

[28] As the protagonists of Jemisin's novel slowly become aware, the assault of the Enemy is not as sudden and unexpected as it might seem. It turns out that the Enemy has been methodically undermining the City's birth, through gentrification and other means, for a very long time.

[29] Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be*, 212.

longer, we will turn to the strategies outlined in speculative fiction, including helping those who are most at risk to flee to safer locations; creating sanctuaries or insulated islands of safety; honoring the ancestors and telling the stories that are threatened with erasure; and various forms of underground resistance.

But as spiritual communities we are lured by something beyond survival. We are called to evolution, to symbiogenesis, to co-becoming. And so, we must ask ourselves these difficult questions:

- *With whom* do we choose to be? (Knowing that, given the surprising nature of evolution, it may be unrealistic to ask who we choose to be.)
- What "DNA" do we bring to what is coming into being? Or, more precisely, because we are all already symbionts, what "DNAs" (plural) do we bring?
- What must die so that new life can punch through?
- What is worth sustaining as a distinct and separate concept or identity? (Unitarian Universalism? Liberalism? Democratic government? The congregation? The United States? The role of minister? Religion itself?) On the other hand, what must be merged or enfolded so that we might survive? So that we might evolve?
- How do we manage to merge without assimilating? To enfold without digesting? How do we celebrate the unique histories and contributions of distinct identities within a community organism that is more than its parts?
- How do we ensure that our symbiotic relationships are mutualistic and not parasitic?

- What new (or old) rituals best tell the story of symbiogenesis? Of sympoiesis?

The City We Became ends with a monologue by the City of New York: "I'm…feeling something more intrinsic to my being reverberate in concert with five other souls. My soul's in there too. We're conjoined now, a spiritual freak show more than fit for Coney Island."[30] In the midst of crisis, on the other side of doom, what magnificent spiritual freak show are we becoming? What beautiful, unimaginable new life is becoming with and punching through?

[30] Jemisin, 430.

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