

Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*: Cruel Optimism and Meritocracy in an Engendered Critical Dystopia

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Abstract:

Rivers Solomon's debut *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) criticizes the American myth of meritocracy and its cruel optimism (cf. Berlant 2011), promoting as it does equality and acceptance for any U.S. citizen. This Black feminist speculative novel presents a future world where slavery is revived on the HSS Matilda, a spaceship divided into upper and lower decks, which represents Antebellum plantation logic. Matilda carries people from the ruins of Earth to a mythical Promised Land, and thus the novel presents the fight of Black women, and particularly of queer Black subjects, against white supremacy, racism and marginalization, especially through the physical and emotional journey of Aster, the main character. Relying on the poetics of critical dystopian writing, the novel imagines a queer futurity for Black and queer Black people in the United States against discrimination, inequality and the lie of a meritocratic ideal.

Keywords: Rivers Solomon; *An Unkindness of Ghosts*; cruel meritocracy; cruel optimism; critical dystopia; queer Black studies; racial (in)equality; Black feminist speculative fiction; engendering.

1. Introduction¹

Now this brings us to two things [...] the American Negro's experience of life, and [...] the American dream [...]. It would be hard to find any two things more absolutely opposed. (Baldwin 2010, 59)

African American women and queer subjects have become remarkably resilient to inequalities and marginalization and have gained exclusive privileges in a system that limits their lives at an individual and collective level. This might seem quite unlikely in the contemporary United States, suffering from the consequences of racism and inequality—and yet in fact it is the setting for a number of fictional works including Rivers Solomon's oeuvre. Solomon, defining themselves as “half woman, half boy, part beast, and a refugee of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade”, gives voice to marginalized, traumatized and yet resilient African and African American people in their fictional works (Solomon, n.d., n.p.). Their novel *Sorrowland* (2021), a gothic horror science-fiction, tells the story of Vern, a member of an African American religious cult known as The Blessed Acres of Cain, the adherents of which follow a separatist agenda. Vern escapes from this cult and gives birth to her twin babies in the woods, where she is haunted by traumatic memories of her people but, at the same time, gains strength and resilience against borders imposed on her life. Solomon's *The Deep* (2019), winner of the Lambda Literary Award in 2020, is a novella that reconfigures the Transatlantic Slave Trade through a portrayal of an underwater city inhabited by the descendants of pregnant African slave women thrown overboard. Among these water-breathing descendants who are unable to recall their traumatic heritage is the historian protagonist Yetu, who remembers all the painful and traumatic stories of her people. Unable to carry the emotional burden of these traumatic memories, Yetu sets them free and escapes to the surface of the water. However, the novella ends with Yetu and her people becoming more resilient by acknowledging and reclaiming their traumatic ancestral past in order to reconstruct their present and future identities and lives.

Solomon's debut novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), finalist for the 30th Lambda Literary Award for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, presents an

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imagined future world where the horrors of African enslavement are relived on Matilda, a plantation spaceship that carries people from the ruins of Earth to a mythical Promised Land. The spaceship is divided into upper and lower decks accommodating white and Black people respectively in a way very much similar to an Antebellum plantation. On the lower deck Black people work on the plantations and do the hard work to provide heat and comfort for the upper deck, where white people enjoy a privileged status. The story revolves around the queer, intersex, dark-skinned, orphaned healer Aster Gray from one of the lower deck groups named as Tarlanders. Because of her race and nonbinary gender, Aster is exposed to physical and psychological violence and abuse by the upper deckers, especially the Guards who are in control of the lower deck's working-class people. Aster completes not only a physical but also an emotional journey through which she has to cope with physical and affective trauma because of her colour and race, rediscover her ancestral past, and move towards an alternative queer future. Thus, the novel offers a glimpse of hope in an otherwise painful world and provokes the idea that cherishing hopes is the only way to deal with inequality experienced by Black people in American society even if it is destructive and ambiguous in the end.

An Unkindness of Ghosts reflects on the continuity of the colonization and slavery experienced by African people in a possible future and thus questions the American Dream that is supposed to bring along equality, freedom, security, safety, acceptance and respect for Black and especially queer Black people.² In that sense, the novel edges towards Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism. According to Berlant, although optimism "enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this*

2 The American Dream as a phrase was used for the first time in the early twentieth century but its seeds were planted in the eighteenth century. In 1705, Robert Beverley, the Virginian planter and historian, described colonial Virginia as the "best poor Man's Country in the World" in which everybody lives in such a happy climate and fertile land that "no body is poor enough to beg, or want Food" (1947, 275). While Beverley reflects on the privileges gained through colonialism by the white supremacy, Benjamin Franklin provides "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America" and states that even poor immigrants such as servants or journeymen can "soon become masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise families, and become respectable citizens" on condition that "they are sober, industrious, and frugal" (2020, 263). Following in their steps, in his seminal work *The Epic of America* (1931), the historian James Truslow Adams coins the term "American Dream" which refers to the "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (1931, 404). Although Adams not only refers to materialistic gains but also personal fulfilment, the American Dream has long been associated with economic success and social mobility. Therefore, the idea that if people try hard enough as long as their abilities allow, there is no barrier to hinder their success has become the dominating ideology behind the American Dream.

thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way,” it turns out to be cruel “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (2011, 2). Berlant uses this definition to understand one’s obsessive attempts to achieve a good life, which is undeniably complex for African American people exposed to various forms of segregation, injustice and racism both in the past and in the present. By presenting the complexity of African American’s traumatized lives, the novel challenges the optimism underlying the meritocratic ideal that through hard work life will be better for Black people in general and queer Black people and Black women in particular. As stated in the Introduction to this Special Issue, the pursuit of the American Dream has created an ethos promising meritocracy for any hard-working or talented citizen (Pignagnoli and Roldán-Sevillano 2025, 7). However, as Victor Tan Chen observes, “[w]hen an entire society embraces meritocratic principles at the expense of other values, this can lead to negative social and collective consequences” as well as the demise of meritocracy in the long run (59). This is mainly because of the mindset that is based on the principle of “efficiency at all costs. Those who fail [...] are redundant and useless [...] They [the unfortunate] deserve their low position because they did not try hard enough” (63). Thus, this accounts for why “America has steadily been moving in the direction of a radical and unbalanced embrace of the culture of meritocracy” (63) as represented in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*.³

Since its publication in 2017, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* has drawn the attention of literary critics from various perspectives. Tesla Cariani argues that the novel portrays “trans and nonbinary characters within futuristic worlds, affirming that trans characters are more than autobiographies and memoirs” (2024, 139) while Frederick C. Staidum Jr. notes that the novel presents “the racialized ungendering of colonization and enslavement” (2024, 250) and Megan Finch underlines how the novel is engaged with “humanist and scientific climate change discourse, redeploing the literary and cultural representation of Black maternal abjection as a resource for Black daughters’, and our, survival at the end of the world” (2024, 21). From a related perspective, Milo Obourn analyses the depiction

3 From a related perspective, in her well-known work *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1995), Jennifer L. Hochschild argues that achieving the American Dream and meritocracy for marginalized groups of people in the second half of the twentieth and in the early twenty-first centuries has become close to impossible. She argues that “the emotional potency of the American Dream has made the people who were able to identify with it the norm for everyone else [...]. Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait” including African Americans exposed to racism, alienation and marginalization not only in the past but also in the present (26).

of Black motherhood in the novel that deconstructs “anthropocentric animacy hierarchies” with a specific focus on disability, queerness, neurodivergence and relationality (2024, 135). Although *An Unkindness of Ghosts* has been analysed from these perspectives, it has not yet been considered in terms of how it exemplifies cruel optimism against Black women and queer Black subject’s traumatic experiences of white supremacy and violence and disproves the lie of a meritocratic society for Black and especially queer Black people in the United States still suffering from the spectres of slavery which have the potential to exist even in distant futures. At the same time, the novel offers a glimpse of hope for queer Black futurity towards its ending by drawing on the conventions of critical dystopian writing and thus offers the possibility for an alternative engendered Black queer futurity.

2. Engendering Critical Dystopias

With a specific focus on Aster’s and her people’s resilience against their traumatic experiences of white supremacy and violence and their perseverance of hope against racial injustice and cruel meritocracy, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* offers a glimpse of an alternative life in an otherwise painful and dystopic world. After Donald Trump won the presidential elections in the United States in 2016, interest in utopian and dystopian narratives has dramatically increased. Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan’s *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts* (2019) and Peter Marks, Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor and Fátima Vieira’s *The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures* (2022) are among the most important studies on dystopias and utopias that depict the traumatic effects of Trump on literature and visual arts. In his analysis of our post-postmodern world dominated by such pessimistic views of the future, science fiction writer John Scalzi refers to the impact of Trumpism and notes that “[i]t’s difficult to focus on writing, particularly fiction, when the world feels like it’s on fire” (2017, n.p.). Furthermore, he asks “[h]ow do science fiction writers trying to build dystopias in their fiction compete with a real world where the United States government is actively denying climate change and threatening nuclear exchanges [...] How does any science fiction writer *finesse* that one?” (2017, n.p.)

As Ildney Cavalcanti argues, the term “dystopia” was first used in the 18th century but its usage became more common in the early 20th century especially after “the gradual dwindling of the utopian ideals of modernity and progress resulting from the harshly violent and authoritarian political events (at times, reaching peaks of genocidal dictatorships and totalitarian states), the devastating wars, and the environmental disasters” (2024, 65). From a related perspective,

Raffaella Baccolini argues that dystopias “warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present society” (2012, 38) while Tom Moylan draws attention to how dystopian writing “draws on the more detailed systemic accounts of utopian narratives by way of an inversion that focuses on the terrors rather than the hopes of history” (2000, 111). While doing this, dystopias present “the character of the misfit, a citizen who feels or learns to feel out of place and at odds with the generally accepted norms and values of the dystopian society” (Baccolini 2012, 38).

With the resurgence of interest in human rights as well as anti-racist, feminist and ecological activism in the 1960s, dystopian narratives have edged towards “critical dystopias” which continue to dominate the 21st century Anglophone literatures (Cavalcanti 2024, 65-66). As Tom Moylan notes, in critical dystopian narratives “the subversive imaging of utopian society and the radical negativity of dystopian perfection is preserved; while the systematizing boredom of the traditional utopia and the cooptation of utopia by modern structures is destroyed” (1986, 10). Furthermore, in her analysis of the genealogy of the term critical dystopia, Cavalcanti outlines its main characteristics as follows: “the coexistence of both utopian and dystopian traces in the works analyzed, brought into effect by a stance of militant (or utopian) pessimism; the cognitive mapping of historical evils, balanced by a textually inscribed counter-narrative move of resistance; [...] genre self-awareness, genre blurring [...]; the activation of a utopian function regarding readers’ critical response and consequent political positioning; recurring traces of gender sensitivity and class and race awareness” (2024, 67-68). From a related feminist perspective, Raffaella Baccolini argues that critical dystopias “maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (2000, 13) and “open a space of contestation and opposition for those groups (women and other ‘eccentric’ subjects whose subject position hegemonic discourse does not contemplate) for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained” (18). Cavalcanti and Baccolini’s suggestions echo Sarah Dittum’s influential observation that “the world as it is offers such a rich variety of nightmares for women that it seems superfluous for fiction to devise ever more horrifying worlds that could be” and, therefore, what we need is “a feminist dystopia [...] that] must have a little of the feminist utopia to it” (2018, n.p.).

An Unkindness of Ghosts meets the requirements of critical dystopias, especially with its critique of the meritocratic American Dream and its exploration of race and class awareness. To begin with, it presents utopian and dystopian traces simultaneously. This is brought into effect by a stance of radical pessimism through the portrayal of African working class exposed to racial injustice and marginalization. At the same time, however, the novel cherishes a

locus of utopian hope through Aster and her friends' resilience to the systemic oppression in the dystopian world of Matilda. To put it another way, the novel draws a cognitive mapping of historical evils against African people during the slavery and colonization period, balanced by its inscription of a counter-narrative of resistance through Aster's journey. This provides the novel with the agency to blur the boundaries between the genres of utopia and dystopia, one of the most important aspects of critical dystopian narratives.

Another relevant aspect of critical dystopias is their recurrent references to gender sensitivity as analysed and discussed by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor in her recently published chapter "Engendering Utopia: The Force of Gender and the Limits of Feminism" (2024).⁴ According to Wagner-Lawlor, there has always been something "queer" about utopian narratives, which "re-presents itself throughout the postwar period in faithful, and increasingly frequent, resistances to the logics of gender, race, and sexuality" (2024, 76). In direct contrast to the recasting of the child figure as the sign of humanity's future in certain feminist utopias, Wagner-Lawlor underlines "the radical utopian work of *engendering* otherwise [...] highlighting the limits of feminist narratives that attempt to derail the social reproduction of a monolithic patriarchy, and signaling the possibilities of utopian (queer) generativity" (77). Drawing on Caterina Nirta's "new ethics of utopianism," which requires an understanding and acknowledgment of transgender bodies as existing now and in the future, Wagner-Lawlor underlines how queer utopias propose "an *engendering* of other histories and other forms of being beyond the conventionally heterosexual and beyond even the conventionally human figure of the child" (64). Therefore, contemporary utopian narratives feature "*difference* rather than sameness" as a form of social reproduction and present "ways of being *as we are* in all our multiplicitous difference [...] which] is a cry for the existential freedom *to be as one is* in the here and now" (64).

Among these queer utopias, Black feminist speculative fiction has a singular space with its presentation and valuing of such multiplicities of genders and sexualities through "[n]onrealist narrative choices [that] [...] illuminate multiple layers of Black life in a real world structured by white supremacy" (Ohman 2021, 299). In doing so, these narratives "interrogate dominant assumptions at the intersection of race, sex, sexuality, and gender in the interests of Black women's freedom" (299). In their conversation that focuses on the contours of Black feminism, Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey reflect on how it relates to

4 In her analysis, Wagner-Lawlor refers to such utopian works as Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017), Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) and River's Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021).

and supplements Trans Feminism. As Green argues, Black feminism has tried to achieve two main responsibilities; it has made us reconsider what the boundaries of the gender binary are and how Black cisgender women have always existed beyond these boundaries, while also highlighting their sufferings as well as the physical conditions affecting them (2017, 439). Drawing on these facts, Green formulates a Black feminist practice that forces us to “disentangle ourselves from a reliance on ‘woman’ and instead think through the ways in which femininity and masculinity are moving in and across all kinds of bodies” because the category of woman “reaches its limits when trying to capture bodies that shift, trans bodies” (442). According to Green, the word trans does not refer to bodies or what bodies do but is “a disruptive orientation [...] a method or mode of engaging time, history, people, things, places with an openness and an acceptance of the excesses that are constantly being created and unaccounted for” (448). With its reliance on such an understanding of transness, Black feminism has the potentiality to “produce a paradigm shift that liberates us from both the freedoms and slaveries of our current representational binds” (450). Accordingly, Black feminist speculative fiction acknowledges queer subjects and gives voice to their sufferings which have been missing in the archive. Chamara Moore defines such narratives as “visionary stories” pushing their readers to “envision futures centering Black queer life while still embodying and maintaining the archive of their Black ancestral past” (2024, 7). In doing so, these narratives provide the “space for the collective trauma of Black people who are queer, trans, and gender nonconforming; those that are practicing distinct speculative work to envision themselves in our own heteropatriarchal world” (7).

As an outstanding example of Black feminist speculative fiction, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* presents a radical imaginary of a Black queer generativity as well as an engendering of other forms of being. First of all, this is traceable to the use of pronouns on the spaceship Matilda. In one of the lower decks where Flick lives, all children are referred to with the pronoun “they” while in Aster’s own deck, where Tarlanders live, feminine pronouns are used to refer to all children. Furthermore, Tarlander bodies including Aster’s are nonbinary because of a hormonal disease called hereditary suprarenal dysregula: “This explained Aster’s hairiness and muscular build despite being born without the external organs that produced testosterone” (Solomon 2017, 20). At the same time, however, Aster has the potentiality to carry an offspring until Theo removes her uterus under the Sovereignty’s order. Likewise, Theo Smith, also known as the Surgeon General, is nonbinary like Aster; he is “[n]ot a man or how a man’s supposed to be. Bent” (108). He is born as a boy with “an unnatural girlishness” (99). Aster calls Theo “an anomaly of man”, “gender-malcontent” and an “otherling” and herself “a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one very strange, flimsy, indecisive



body” (308). Theo, however, believes that it does not matter whether their bodies are nonbinary or not because they “get to decide what [their] bodies are or are not” (308). With its presentation of these new DNA strands, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* translates into a queer utopia that proposes and glorifies other forms of being beyond heterosexuality. Thus, the novel showcases how the tenets of Black feminist speculative fiction are blended with those of Trans feminism. In line with the definitions of Black feminist speculative fiction, the novel sheds light on various layers of Black marginalized life and the suffering it implies under the dominance of white supremacy through its nonrealist narrative strategies, while questioning prevalent boundaries between and presumptions about sexuality, gender, woman/man and acknowledging the presence of excesses and non-conforming bodies. In doing so, the novel edges towards a visionary story which forces its readers to visualize a distant future centring the collective trauma of Black queer life along with the Black ancestral past against the dominance of white heteropatriarchal world. The novel achieves this particularly by relying on the conventions of critical dystopian writing, criticizing the fallacy of the meritocratic dream promoted by the United States and raising race and class awareness.

3. Cruel Optimism and the (Im)possibility of Meritocracy

As can be inferred from the discussion above, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* combines the haunting pessimism born from the portrayal of racial injustice and the marginalization of the African working class with optimism rooted in the possibility of Black queer futurity and freedom. Nasar Meer uses Berlant's theory of cruel optimism to understand racism against Black people in *The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice* (2022). According to Meer, it is impossible to consider racial justice as an aspect of good life in Berlant's understanding of the term, especially when considering contemporary social systems and racial projects. In Berlant's words “optimism's double bind” refers to the contradiction between the “image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism” and the awkwardness and danger of “detach[ing yourself] from what is already not working” (2011, 263). Drawing on this formulation, Meer states that trying to achieve racial justice is a cruel attempt, which has its roots in hoping to achieve it while feeling that it is impossible to do so: “[T]here is no likely end to the struggle for racial justice, only the promise this heralds and the desire to persevere, even despite knowledge of likely failure” (Meer 2022, 1). This is especially true when considering the past and present racial segregations in various parts of the United States. With a reference to this historical fact, Meer states that racial justice is multi-temporal and refracts through “that which has happened in the past, that which is manifest in the present, as well as that which

will likely occur in the future” (2). Against the prevalence of racial injustice, Meer suggests accepting its ordinariness and regularity and taking action against it. This will become possible “when we cease to pretend racial injustice is an aberration in an otherwise race-less, meritocratic society [...] and when White people, too, are willing to take ownership of racial inequalities and understand these as an integral part of society” (128). In other words, if we want “the cruel optimism of racial justice transform into a justified perseverance of hope”, the burden of racial justice must be equally shared between racialized minorities and white supremacy (130).

An Unkindness of Ghosts presents the cruel optimism of racial justice grounded in the failure of hopes for a better life for Black people in general and queer Black people and Black women in particular. During their operation, Flick draws attention to the lives of lower deck people including themselves: “[N]othing is how it should be on this cursed ship [...] *Should* disappeared three hundred years ago when our old home went gone. There’s no such thing as *supposed to in space*” (Solomon 2017, 13). Although Flick seems to have lost their hopes for a better present and future for lower deck people, Aster uses all her physical and mental energy to fight against the oppressive regime on Matilda. When Sovereign Nicolaeus, the cruel ruler of Matilda, dies of a mysterious disease, Theo’s uncle, a dictator Lieutenant, succeeds him. Many people bring luxurious gifts for the Lieutenant’s succession except Aster; she leaves Flick’s frozen and preserved gangrenous foot in a medicine bag as a gift for the new Sovereign next to others. She attaches a note to her gift that reads “*Now that you are sovereign, please consider reevaluating the atmosphere controls in the lowerdecks*” (222; italics in the original). Although she commits this gruesome and rebellious act with the aim of prompting the Lieutenant to listen to his conscience and achieving equal living standards between upper and lower deck people, her efforts end in vain. As a reaction to the gangrenous foot gift, the Lieutenant gives the order for Flick to be executed in public, which dashes Aster’s all hopes: “They made them [Flick] walk on their still-healing little leg, blood coming through the bandages, their wails so loud that at that moment Aster knew gods weren’t real, because if they were, they’d end this now. All of humankind” (246). Aster’s loss of hope for racial equality echoes cruel optimism’s double bind offered by Berlant and Meer. She holds onto hopes for achieving racial equality despite feeling its impossibility.

When considering the setting of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* that takes place in the space in a far future, it would not be wrong to argue that Aster’s efforts exemplify the multi-temporality of racial injustice which existed during the slavery and colonization of African people, manifests itself in the contemporary United States, and will most probably occur in the future. One step further, Aster acknowledges the ordinariness of racial injustice whereas white people like



the Lieutenant fails to take any responsibility. This shows that cruel optimism for racial justice exists in the form of the perseverance of hope cherished by Aster because the responsibility of racial justice is not equally shared between racialized minorities like Aster and white supremacy like the Lieutenant.

More importantly, cruel optimism for racial justice reveals the lie of a meritocratic society for African American people. As Victor Tan Chen states, “[t]he classic narrative of the American dream is that of the immigrant who comes to the United States penniless and achieves middle-class prosperity—if not for themselves, then for their children. But [...] the rapid growth of inequality in the United States has raised the standards for truly great success” (2022, 58). Therefore, the idea that “everyone who steadfastly practices certain practical virtues [self-control, discipline, effort, perseverance, and responsibility] will find a place at the table” proposed by the American Dream with regards to a meritocratic society should be taken with a pinch of salt (Schwarz 1999, 6). As Virginia Pignagnoli and Laura Roldán-Sevillano state, this results in “cruel meritocracy” which provokes individuals to believe in the ideal of meritocracy incessantly although they fail to achieve their dreams no matter how hard they work and/or how talented they are in the related field (2025, 7). As a result, marginalized and disadvantageous people are disappointed by “the tyranny and unfairness” behind the meritocratic society as in the example of African Americans (7).

What triggers the rise of cruel meritocracy is also dependent on gender, as in the case of nonbinary African Americans. Fulfilling the meritocratic dream has always been easy for wealthy white men rather than African Americans, especially for those marginalized LGBTQAI+ African Americans. As Jane Flax states, “the normative American citizen has always been a white man and, though others have won rights, he remains so” (1998, 2). Drawing on Flax, Calvin C. Jillson underlines the fact that when marginalized people “did achieve new rights, those rights usually amounted to the right to compete against well-entrenched white men in a matrix of established law and policy that they had developed to protect their current interests and future prospects” (2016, 6-7). LGBTQAI+ African Americans are no exception to Flax’s and Jillson’s comments; they are excluded from the privileged status gained by the white heterosexual American.

The condition of marginalized African Americans is a telling example for the conflict between such principles as meritocracy, liberty, equality, opportunity, and the rule of law as well as such practical realities of American history including ongoing racism, segregation and loss of meritocracy, which are intricately woven with the spectres of slavery in the contemporary United States. As Saidiya Hartman has argued, “despite the shift from the legal-status ascriptions characteristic of the antebellum period, the emphasis on the blood, sexuality, and commingling in postemancipation racial discourse ultimately refigured the status-race of chattel

slavery” and, as a result, “racial slavery was transformed rather than annulled” (1997, 10). Such continuation of racial slavery and Black subjugation has been visible in state sanctioned racism, debt peonage and involuntary servitude, which raises questions about “the meaning of freedom” as well as “the narrative of progress” (Hartman, 1997, 10). In order to understand this legacy of slavery in the 21st century, Hartman formulates the concept of “afterlife of property/slavery” which requires understanding “the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which Black life remains in peril” (2008, 13). She further comments on the legacies of slavery as follows:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. (2007, 6)

Thus, Hartman reflects on the presence of slavery in the contemporary United States as manifest in limited opportunities, poor living conditions, early death, poverty and imprisonments especially when considering the current predicaments of marginalized African American subjects.

Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts* presents such legacies of slavery in the contemporary and future United States and, thus, criticizes the American meritocratic ideal that promotes security, safety, acceptance and respect for any sober and industrious American citizen. The novel achieves such criticism through multiple ways, the actual geography of Matilda being the foremost. The ship divided into upper decks and lower decks including field decks also known as plantation areas works as a criticism against the meritocratic ideal, which signifies the enduring presence of slavery even in an intergalactical future. Life in the upper and lower decks is completely different from each other. Although there are Blackouts and lack of energy on Matilda, woods, lakes, beaches, and game fields in the upper decks endlessly consume a lot of energy because it is important to preserve natural life for upper deck people. In contrast, lower deck people working in extremely difficult conditions do not have access to heat even for their survival and some of them unfortunately lose their limbs, as with the example of Flick, whose foot has to be amputated because of the extremely cold weather conditions on Matilda. In Theo’s uncle’s words, “[t]hey [lower deck people like Aster] are animals, and if it weren’t for us [upper deck people] bending them into some kind of shape, they’d live in complete chaos and sin” (Solomon 2017, 101).

Furthermore, the Tarlanders are regarded as creatures who do not even deserve the dignity of death because they are nonbinary subjects. As discussed above in relation to the engendering of critical dystopias, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* explores the porous boundaries of sexuality, gender, woman/man while reflecting on the collective traumatic experiences of Black queer life and the Black ancestral past. This is traceable to the way Tarlanders as nonbinary subjects are treated by the white supremacist society. A scientist named Frederick Hauser proposes that, because Tarlanders are neither male nor female, they must have come “from the Realm of Chaos [...]. Their demon forms could not conform to the Holy Order set forth by the Heavens” (19). As a result, they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse by upper deck people, especially Guards who call their actions a form of redemption and justice. For example, when Aster is about to be beaten by a Guard, she recalls how physical violence is rationalized by Guards: “How beatings were good. How each strike undid one sin” (52). Thus, life on Matilda represents the practical realities of American past and present life dominated by segregation, discrimination and violence against African American people, especially African American LGBTQAI+ subjects. The predicament of lower deck people conforms to Hartman’s formulations of slavery in the contemporary United States which has not come to an end but merely transformed into different practices. In other words, lower deck people working under harsh conditions in the plantations, having limited access to health and education sources and exposed to extreme poverty as well as marginalization, stigmatization and physical and psychological violence, echo the afterlives of slavery not only in the present but also in a distant future. In doing so, the novel questions the meaning of freedom and the narrative of progress for African American subjects and invalidates the American meritocratic ideal, which also conforms to the tenets of dystopian narratives explored above.

Another specific example for Solomon’s critique of cruel meritocracy on Matilda is Theo’s condition. Theo is biracial; he is the “bastard child of a Black woman” and the former Sovereign Sedvar Smith (99). Because of his miraculous achievements during his childhood, he is called as the boy genius and finds himself a prestigious position among upper deck society. When he is only thirteen years old, he performs cardiac replacement surgery on Sovereign Nicolaeus by using an artificial heart designed by himself and ends the polio epidemic by creating a vaccine against it even though he gets infected in the process (202). He says that visions from the Heavens guide his inventions and thus he is called as the Surgeon, “a reference to the scriptural verse that alludes to one of Almighty God’s epithets” (202). As a grown up, Theo is aware of the fact that because upper deck society sees him as “someone holy, they can tolerate [his] differences,” that is, his queerness (108). More importantly, however, his biracial heritage provides

him with such a whitish skin that “plausible deniability had allowed him to keep his status when his true ancestry came to prominence during puberty” (36-37). In other words, Theo is able to keep his high-ranking status among upper deck society thanks to his biracial heritage that provides him with the opportunity to pass more than his intelligence or his abilities as a surgeon. Thus, the novel criticizes how achieving meritocracy has been comparatively easy for white Americans as opposed to Black subjects whose race has created a further layer of difficulty. In Theo’s case, even though he is biracial, his whitish skin outweighs his abilities and capacities as a surgeon.

Similar to Theo’s condition, Aster’s escape from the plantations on Matilda back to the Great Lifehouse serves to criticize the ideal of meritocracy with a reference to the Antebellum period. Solomon’s use of Matilda as the plantation ship impels Aster to seek freedom in search of a better future, which is inherently found in neo-slave narratives that present a slave’s journey from captivity towards fugitivity and liberation. With Theo and her friend Giselle’s help, Aster decides to decipher her deceased mother Lune’s journals in order to understand the mystery behind her death as well as the long-hidden secrets of Matilda. After finding a way out and decoding Lune’s journals, Aster goes back to the Earth with her mother’s skeleton as well as Giselle’s dead body in her arms. Aster’s escape from Matilda back to the Earth resembles that experienced by slave women during the Antebellum period. As Bernard Bell notes, neo-slave narratives are “modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (1987, 289). Since Bell defined it, neo-slave narratives have expanded to include those texts not only set in the Antebellum period but also those in the present as well as in distant futures. As Nadine Fligel states, “the neo-slave narrative is liberated from the rigid form of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with speculative fiction” (2012, 218). By drawing on the conventions of speculative fiction—particularly the dystopian elements explored above—*An Unkindness of Ghosts* presents Aster landing back on Earth and witnessing to its rejuvenation; trees have grown, various creatures have appeared and there are no traces of whatever tragedy has happened (Solomon 2017, 347-348). By doing so, the novel conforms to Hartman’s argument that the marginalized Black people demand “imagin[ing] a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended” which “conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future” (2008, 13). *An Unkindness of Ghosts* employs Aster’s escape from the plantations as a strategy to reflect on the Antebellum period, criticize the presence of a meritocratic ideal and insinuate the possibility of a better future freed from the shackles of slavery⁵. More importantly, the novel achieves this

5 See Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ *M Archive: After the End of the World* (2018) and *Spill: Scenes*

through the possibility of Black queer futurity, which echoes optimism rooted in critical dystopian elements found in Black speculative feminist novels analysed and discussed above.

4. Conclusions

As the above analysis has sought to demonstrate, Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* provides a telling example of the statement expressed by James Baldwin in the epigraph to this article; it is impossible to consider the fulfilment of the American Dream for African American people who have long been exposed to racial injustice, marginalization and stigmatization resulting in cruel optimism for racial equality. At the same time, however, the novel ends with a hopeful tone; Aster manages to go back to the Earth. When she lands on Earth, Aster recognizes that everywhere is surrounded by huge trees and plants as if everything has rejuvenated: "Aster didn't know what tragedy had befallen this place, but time seemed to have erased it. Though 325 years had passed on Matilda, a thousand had passed here" (Solomon 2017, 348). With a specific reference to the Earth's complete recovery from whatever tragedies it has suffered from and the revival of plantation and nature, the novel hints at the possibility of a better future for humanity in general and Black queer people in particular. Furthermore, Aster goes back to Earth with two dead bodies; Giselle's corpse and her mother Luna's skeleton pieces. Rather than featuring sameness or presenting a child figure as the saviour of humanity's future, the novel celebrates existential freedom to be in various ways of being as one is through Aster's survival, a queer nonbinary figure. Against the assertions that "the future is the province of the child and therefore not for the queers", José Esteban Muñoz argues that hope is not intricately woven with the child figure but queerness which is "primarily about futurity and hope" (2009, 11). He further states that "if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon" (11). By employing the strategies of critical dystopian writing, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* marks a paradigm shift and proposes a hopeful queer futurity without a child figure. In other words, the novel reads as a queer theorizing of utopia which echoes Wagner-Lawlor's statements that "it always already exists as a virtual imagining, which [...] is exactly as concrete as utopia needs to be" (2024, 76). In doing so, Solomon broaches in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* the subject of cherishing hopes to deal with marginalization, inequality, cruel optimism and the lie of meritocracy in the United States.

of *Black Feminist Fugitivity* (2016) for the invocation of Black fugitivity, Black history, memory, resistance and resilience.

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