Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, vol. 29, 2025. Seville, Spain, ISSN1133-309-X, 7-25.
http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/REN.2025.i29.6

BLACK UTOPIA AND BODY AGENCY IN RIVERS SOLOMON'S *AN UNKINDNESS OF GHOSTS*

MÓNICA CALVO-PASCUAL
Universidad de Zaragoza
mocalvo@unizar.es

Received 18 June 2025
Accepted 26 November 2025

KEYWORDS: Black utopia; Afrofuturism; critical posthumanism; black antihumanism; agency; queer kinship; neurodivergence.
PALABRAS CLAVE: utopía negra; afrofuturismo; posthumanismo crítico; antihumanismo negro; agencia; parentesco no heteronormativo; neurodivergencia.

ABSTRACT: After situating Rivers Solomon's debut novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) as a Black utopia following Zamalin's definition of the genre, this essay will explore the text from the intra-acting lenses of black antihumanism, critical posthumanism, and queer kinship. I contend that Solomon's novel surpasses the notions of Afrofuturism and (white) critical posthumanism alike through its portrayal of the main characters' gender and sexual non-conformity and the radical kinship bonds they develop among themselves and with the nonhuman in the protagonist's case. Furthermore, by the characters' willful control and agency over their own bodies and the future possibilities envisioned in its open ending, Solomon's text subverts and explodes the Western, Enlightenment, colonial construction of white (civilized) subjecthood as opposed to the animalization of the black body and the universalist, exceptionalist logic of state-sanctioned brutality inflicted on African Americans since Antebellum times.
RESUMEN: Tras definir la primera novela de Rivers Solomon *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) como una utopía negra siguiendo el estudio que Zamalin hace de este género, el presente artículo examina la obra desde los prismas del antihumanismo negro, el posthumanismo crítico y el parentesco no heteronormativo. Argumento que la novela de Solomon sobrepasa las nociones de afrofuturismo y del posthumanismo crítico blanco a través de su representación de la contestación de género e identidad sexual de los

personajes principales y de las relaciones de parentesco radicales que desarrollan entre ellos, así como con lo no humano en el caso de la protagonista. Es más, a través de la agencia que los personajes centrales ejercen sobre sus cuerpos, junto con las posibilidades que proyecta el final abierto de la novela, el texto de Solomon subvierte la construcción occidental Ilustrada y colonial del sujeto blanco civilizado en contraposición a la animalización de los cuerpos negros, así como la lógica universalista y excepcionalista de la brutalidad infligida a los afroamericanos desde la época de la esclavitud.

AFROFUTURISM AND BLACK UTOPIA

Rivers Solomon's debut novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) is set aboard HSS *Matilda*, a spaceship endlessly traversing the universe at superhigh speed. This futuristic scenario encapsulates a society conformed by the descendants of all the survivors from a catastrophically devastated uninhabitable Earth (known by Matildans as the Great Lifehouse). They have been in search for a seemingly unattainable "Promised Land" for more than three hundred Matildan years—or one thousand on the equivalent Earth time. Religious overtones inspire the racist, cis-heteropatriarchal social organization of the wandering nation, and the different levels of the spaceship, "divided by metal, language, and armed guards" (Solomon 16), are ruled by Sovereign Nicolaeus and his successor Lieutenant, two tyrannical figures holding absolute 'divine' power.

Such a brief outline of the plot invites an easy classification of the novel into the science fiction subgenre Mark Dery coined as Afrofuturism in 1993, as it embraces most of its defining features: it is African American speculative fiction that addresses contemporary racial concerns through its combination of futuristic technoculture, Middle Passage imagery and the diasporic history of African Americans.[1] Afrofuturism broadly applies to Black American science fictions that "both revise history and imagine impossible trajectories of black freedom" (Zamalin 10). It frequently does so by portraying black characters engaged in space journeys that echo and reverse the trauma of the Middle Passage and African Diaspora, setting into

[1] It is only fair to acknowledge that, given the specifically African American diasporic perspective of the subgenre, African artists and Africanist scholars alike have recently adopted the term Africanfuturism to refer to the African artistic production that, sharing the futuristic drive of Afrofuturism, addresses the African nondiasporic experience from a perspective rooted in African culture and mythology (Cleveland 8).

conversation the historical past of slavery and a future of possibility, freedom, and redress. However, I will follow the path opened by Megen de Bruin-Molé in her article "Salvaging Utopia" (2021), where she aptly argues that *An Unkindness of Ghosts* can be more suitably described as a Black utopia.

In his pivotal work *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019) Alex Zamalin traces the seeds and history of what he denominates Black utopia throughout the African American literary tradition in order to draw a series of defining features of the genre. He recounts how Black American history and life can be properly described as dystopian, from the denial of any human right that came with slavery, turning African people into "exchangeable commodities to be exploited by the highest bidder" (Zamalin 6), through the dehumanization of lynch mob violence in Jim Crow times, to current institutional, police, and judicial violence in the United States. Yet, he points to the "utopian kernel" (6) at the onset of African American experience, when "the subjugation of slaves created a transcendent culture in which spirituals embodied the prophetic faith in reaching the promised land of freedom" (7). Zamalin (7-9) points to Martin R. Delany's diasporic Black fantasy fiction *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859) as the earliest expression of Black utopia in African American literature, outlining the evolution of the genre's initial focus on black self-determination towards explorations of post-racial futures and decolonization, as is the case of W.E.B. DuBois's "The Comet" (1920) and Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954). He also highlights the contributions of science fiction writings that added gender and sexual concerns on top of racial issues, like Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Zamalin thus extracts a series of common features shared by what he denominates Black utopias: they all engage in a dialogue with the social conditions of the times when they are written, with their "prevailing political realities, crises, and cultural trends" (10)—always with the background of Black diaspora, whereby "new visions of collective life and racial identity" are envisioned while denouncing the discriminating conditions of the present times (1). Black utopian fictions unravel the hidden dynamics of the racist system of domination so instrumental for the development of modernity and global capitalism (11), which has largely been dependent on the construction of Blackness as nonhuman animal or as less than human, to borrow Rosi Braidotti's phrase to define the

social downgrading of non-hegemonic social groups as disposable bodies (19).

Even if some of Solomon's fiction has been described as Afrofuturist, both because their main characters are black people "striving to imagine a better world for themselves and their families, and because Solomon explicitly uses these fictions to address some of the struggles of the present" (de Bruin-Molé 111), their writing also includes fantastical elements, like the influence of the paranormal, that exceed the range of Afrofuturism and its typical association with "science fiction and technology in the future, replete with robots and supercomputers" (Zamalin 10).[2] Although *An Unkindness of Ghosts* is certainly futuristic—post-apocalyptic indeed—and centered on space travel toward the possibility of a potentially better future life away from the Earth, it is led by a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal capitalist elite that oppresses and exploits the racialized population, which is actually enslaved in the ship. As a matter of fact, the name of the ship, *Matilda*, significantly takes after Clotilde, as Solomon themselves revealed in an interview (Watkins). Clotilde is the name of the last ship that is known to have carried African slaves in the Middle Passage, just as Matilda's journey leads to anything but a conquest of freedom for the black characters. Significantly, as de Bruin-Molé points out, while

> Solomon's stories […] tend to begin as dystopias, imagining worlds in which the characters are cut off from the future by a grim and often fatal present, […] they open up a space in which the marginalized and defeated (the post-apocalyptic) can imagine the possibility of utopia once more. (112, 113)

The utopian core underlying trends like women's critical dystopias and recent science fiction denotes, for Raffaella Baccolini, "a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon within the pages of dystopian sf and in these anti-utopian times" (4). Just as the kernels of hope are also born at the heart of dystopia both in African American history and in Black utopias, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* certainly begins as a dystopia. For

[2] While such multifaceted surpassing of the limits of Afrofuturism and generic hybridity are self-evident in Solomon's *The Deep* (2019) and *Sorrowland* (2021), while *Model Home* (2024) belongs in an altogether different genre like gothic fiction, the departure from Afrofuturism is more nuanced and subtle in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017). Hence the focus on their debut novel in this article.

a start, the population in the spaceship is divided into different decks named by the letters of the alphabet, from A to Z, according to their social class, race, and status: the darker their skin is, the lower down the ship (and the alphabet) they live and, consequently, the harsher their living conditions are. Matildan society is thus organized according to humanist exceptionalist and universalist criteria, whereby the white, wealthy, and gender-conforming elite enjoy luxurious lives on the upper decks of the spaceship at the expense of the black, brown, and gender-deviant population on the lower decks. Hence, upper-deck Matildans relish the comfort of high-quality family lodgings, heating and air conditioning, abundant and varied food, freedom of movement and leisure time. Meanwhile, racialized and gender-deviant low-deck Matildans are forced to work all day long either in the Field Decks picking sugar cane and other crops or exposed to nuclear radiation from working on the generator that powers the ship. They all spend their curfew time—when the work shifts end at night—confined in the cramped cell-like cubicles they are forced to share in the lower decks, enduring life-threatening conditions marked by arbitrarily violent policing, nightly head counting, freezing cold, extreme poverty and starvation.[3]

Tarlanders—the inhabitants of lower decks ranging from P to T, where the protagonist lives—hold the status of slaves, replicating the Antebellum American plantation system; they are deemed as inhuman creatures whose bodies can be probed and abused much in line with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's notion of the "plasticity" enforced upon Black bodies in the context of slavery, as "a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once" (3). Tarlanders are represented as a community of *homo sacer*, to borrow Giorgio Agamben's concept of the individual deprived of sovereignty and constricted to the condition of

[3] Megan Finch (27) establishes an interesting parallel between the power dynamics of the racialized deck structure of *Matilda* and contemporary geopolitics: the fact that the ship is fed by a single power supply that keeps a comfortable temperature in the upper decks at the expense of the lower ones freezing to death can be read as the global South paying the consequences of consumerism and comfort in the global North. Some examples may include the deforestation and extreme draught caused by extensive avocado plantations in Mexico and the crisis of subsistence agriculture in Bolivia and Peru due to the mass production of quinoa, both to meet the demands of the middle-class recent obsession with healthy diets and the so-called 'superfood' in global North.

bare life (123-24). *Matilda* is a biopolitical state where the ruling elite has "the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. […] To exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembe 11, 12). This is clearly reflected in the novel through the regular practice of public whippings and executions to set an example and keep the black population under strict control. The fact that the absolute ruler in this plantation society is known as the Sovereign is an explicit allusion to Michel Foucault's notion of sovereignty as "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe 27), which takes us to Braidotti's elaboration on Agamben's notion of *zoē* or bare life—the realm of the *homo sacer*, defined by their bodies and connection to nature, as opposed to *bíos* or the qualified life of the sovereign subjects. As Braidotti argues, all beings that deviate from the liberal humanist universalist ideal of humanity—white, male cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied—are relegated to the "less than human status of disposable bodies" (15), always-already inferior to the rational mind signified by the bodily unmarked sovereign subject.

Within the oppressed group of racially marked characters, four stand out as the pillars of the narrative and for their complex identities. Aster Grey, the black, non-binary, lesbian, neurodivergent protagonist, is located at multiple sites of intersectional oppression and is therefore well beyond the range of the exclusionary, prescriptive concept of humanity. Giselle is Aster's rebellious black psychotic, apparently pansexual friend, irreversibly traumatized by the continuous sexual assaults and physical violence on the part of the white guards. Aint Melusine, black birth mother to Theo, nanny to white girls on the upper decks and teacher of black children in the lower, who raised orphaned Aster. And Theo, the former Sovereign's apparently white illegitimate son, who is actually mix-raced, effeminate, and transitioning into womanhood.

In the belief that her mother, Lune Grey, committed suicide soon after Aster's birth, she had been metaphorically and obsessively chasing the ghost of her late mother and trying to decipher her encoded diaries and notes, which account for her discovering a way out of *Matilda*'s destination by sending the ship back towards the Earth. Aster finds out that, through one of the only two windows in the ship, Lune could see the world, as could the Sovereign from his private quarters, and that both the Sovereign and Lune died, with a difference of 25 Matildan years, of metal poisoning from *siluminium*, "a rare metal that allowed *Matilda* to travel at velocities approaching

light-speed by compressing space" (Solomon 157). Although Lune had reversed the ship's route, expecting it to reach the Great Lifehouse in a year, Aster learns that the journey is actually taking twenty-five years and they are finally approaching the Earth. A spark of hope flickers at the heart of dystopia when Aster optimistically realizes that "though three hundred years had passed on *Matilda*, considering the relativistic speeds, more than one thousand years had passed on the Great Lifehouse. Maybe life had started anew there after whatever disaster had reduced it to ruins" (289). It is this hope, in fact, that fuels Aster's impulse to leave *Matilda* in a shuttle and return to the Earth. Together with the seeds of revolution she sows on *Matilda*, this glimpse of hope is the grounds for considering the novel a Black utopia as it explores not better future worlds but current possibilities. To use Zamalin's terms, it may be considered "a fantastical meditation on untapped possibilities already embedded within society—unconditional freedom, equality, interracial intimacy, solidarity, and social democracy" (10). Solomon's novel thus explores these possibilities through the protagonists' engagement in two related sites of revolution that I will analyze in what follows. On the one hand, by reclaiming their body agency and desire as relational, Aster and Theo resist and explode the notion of the plasticity of black bodies. On the other, Aster develops radical kinship and coalition building (Aouragh) across gender, race and class boundaries not only with Theo and Tarlanders, but also with and through flora, fauna, and eventually the earth.

NEURODIVERGENCE AND BODY DEVIANCE

Except for three chapters narrated by secondary characters—Theo, Aint Melusine, and Giselle—the predominant narrative voice in the novel is that of an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator that holds much information from the reader and frequently reveals it by means of fragmented analepses. This narrator usually delegates internal focalization on Aster, the 25-year-old neurodivergent black, biologically female, nonbinary medical apprentice. Aster's internal focalization, predominantly through free indirect style, is significant insofar as it enables—or rather forces—the reader to perceive reality from her point of view, thereby providing an exquisite portrayal of the psycho-emotional and intellectual idiosyncrasy of a self-consciously neurodivergent person's relationship with herself and the others, unable as she is of looking people in the eye (Solomon 309). As the

narrator eloquently states: "Again, Aster was confused as she was as a child, unable to interpret the people around her. Their bodies, their behaviors, their actions spoke in a tongue with too many tenses, moods, and declensions, all the verbs irregular" (259). The use of this narrative strategy smoothly takes the neurotypical reader from an alienating, defamiliarized approach to external reality, through progressive naturalization, to an empathic connection with the neurodivergent mind. While the narrator never mentions words like autism or neurodivergence, Aster as internal focalizer is quite explicit about her neuroatypical need to scrutinize and interpret the words, gestures, and facial expressions of other characters, trying to memorize matches when "different sorts of words belonged to different sorts of occasions," like "*umbilicus*—navel. Belly button" (183). She is "always memorizing new ways of being with people" (13), learning "the ability to modulate her naturally abrupt manner for the comfort of others" (11), although her efforts are not always successful: "She'd thought she'd trained her mind out of its predisposition toward excessive literalism, but there it was, persistent as ever, making a fool of her" (40). Another feature of neurodivergence, her inherent inability to lie and pretend (197, 240), is as prominent and dangerous as her difficulty at "decoding euphemisms" (112), both provoking awkward situations that often end up in physical punishment at the hands of the Sovereign's guards. As a consequence, "Aster always thought *thrice* before talking, having said the wrong thing too many times" (189).

In this line, Milo Obourn profusely demonstrates how Solomon's novel fits M. Remi Yergeau's notion of 'autistext' as a nonallistic or neuroatypical mode of rhetoricity that eschews standard literary tropes in favor of precise, concrete, and at times even scientific language, even if not devoid of its own kind of rhetoricity. The narrative voice itself acquires Aster's neurodivergent characteristics, for instance, when it refers to the act of crying as "tears mix[ing] with intraocular fluid in her eyes, glazing the whites surrounding her irises" (153), or when it defines what a eulogy is as Aster would: "A eulogy was a tribute to the dead, in which the speaker spoke thoughtfully about the deceased. Aster felt prepared to do thus" (343). Aster's focalization thus allows the reader to access her neuroatypical thinking without the need to 'represent' "autistic bodyminds" (Obourn 204). Such is the case, for instance, when she ponders: "Aster didn't know if the woman meant *hear* literally or as a euphemism for *understand*. Depending on which it was, Aster's answer would be different. […] She didn't know why people were so indirect" (22, 262).

The absence of a straightforward definition of Aster as neurodivergent goes hand in hand with the diffuse representation of characters in gender and sexual terms. In fact, when questioned on the issue of labels regarding gender-deviant characters in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Solomon explained their approach in the following terms:

> Aster is an intersex butch lesbian, but maybe agender. Theo is a nonbinary trans woman. These are my interpretations, but arguments could certainly be made for other classifiers. Part of the beauty of avoiding labels to me is that it's saying "identities aren't sacrosanct." To me, they're not objective truths or innate biological realities. Rather, they're part of the way we choose to interpret ourselves in a vast network of information and social relationships. (Falck)

Indeed, the pernicious effects of categorizing and labelling human beings according to the oppressive establishment's hierarchical view of normalcy and humanity are exposed but also resisted and reappropriated in the novel. The Sovereign's successor, Lieutenant, tries to humiliate Aster by telling her that brown people like her are so ugly that they would kill themselves if they could see their faces in a mirror, comparing them to his prettier six pit bulls and to mice. To his remark that a mouse's loss of a limb in a glue trap is for the best, Aster replies with her knowledge of spiny mice and their capacity to "regrow entire limbs after losing them" (Solomon 242).

Regarding the colonial animalization of black people the quotation above evokes, Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself* (2020) opens a fruitful reflection on the kinship forged between African American slaves and horses in Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* Bennett argues that both slaves and horses are similarly constituted as "a *living commodity* […], saleable, living beings" that are "used for labor, entertainment, and breeding but also possess an interiority that is, by the rule, denied" (Bennett 2). The bond between them emerges "in the midst of unthinkable violence, kinship born of mutual subjugation" (2). By directing his attention to this early text and through his analysis of later works by African American authors, Bennett traces how the Black aesthetic tradition has paved the ground for new conceptualizations of interspecies relations, interrogating, and eventually overriding, "the forms of antiblack thought that have maintained the fissure between human and animal" (4). Similarly,

Jackson investigates how Enlightenment and colonial discourses based their construction of white humanity as superior and civilized on the simultaneous and parallel anti-black abjection of the nonhuman animal and of (animalized) black gender and sexuality (3). The dualistic heritage of Western philosophy whereby the mind and spirit were deemed as superior and pure in opposition to the puritanical view of the body and its appetites as sources of corruption and as the reminder of humans' animal nature that ought to be repressed and eradicated, is the backdrop of the European colonial perception of "the black body's fleshiness" (6), especially black women's bodies. Together with nakedness—seen as a sign of promiscuity and lack of civility—African women's breasts were perceived as monstrously large and symptomatic of barbarism (7). The extent of colonial exploitation and objectification of black women's bodies is epitomized by the notorious case of Sarah Baartman, who was exhibited in British and French freak fairs due to her steatopygic bodily features.

Representations of black bare-breasted women as highly eroticized objects of desire have likewise pervaded the colonizer's mind, as it has traditionally fueled white men's fantasies and lust for African women. In her study of Josephine Baker's performances aimed at challenging such stereotypes, Andrea D. Barnwell (1997) refers to the complex sexual and ideological constructs that have shaped Western concepts of the binary self/other. The rhetoric of black women's bodies satisfying colonial fantasies has serious consequences as they are deprived of a sense of agency and autonomy.[4] From her black antihumanist perspective, Jackson thus scrutinizes "the necessity of the abjection and bestialization of black gender and sexuality" for "the normative construction of 'the human' as rational, self-directed, and autonomous" (13)—i.e., the exclusionary universalist notion of the human as symbolized by the Vitruvian Man that critical posthumanism also seeks to deconstruct from its poststructuralist antihumanist and new materialist approaches.

[4] Yet, these degrading images of black female bodies produced by colonialist discourses have been contested extensively since Baker's performances in the 1920s. Indeed, she challenged and exceeded white male expectations by empowering herself with self-agency and sovereignty. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" Audre Lorde acknowledges the power that rises from such racist and sexist sexualization because "the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (53).

Taking as point of departure the historical abject animalization of blacks as less than human objects of exchange and exploitation, and much in the line of Judith Butler's advocacy of the productive and celebratory resignification of the derogatory term "queer" in the early 1990s, Bennett unearths how black authors engage in a critical embrace of the connection of blackness and animal life that "has been used against them as a tool of derision and denigration" (Bennett 4). Relegated to a grey area outside the human-nonhuman divide, an alternative mode of being in the world is thus constructed by celebrating and loving the flesh, constitutive of the bodies over which Black Americans' agency and autonomy were denied. This focus on embodiment enlists critical Black studies and Black antihumanism in close connection to the centrality of reclaimed embodiment that thinkers like Braidotti endorse in their inclusionary critical posthumanist ethics. Their exposure and deconstruction of the universalist and exceptionalist ideology that underlies the humanist exclusion from the notion of "human" of the bodily marked challenges the exploitation and marginalization of the racialized and sexualized others and the nonhuman species (the naturalized others) alike. Both theoretical approaches also share their denunciation of the economic underpinnings of exclusion and subjugation—the original sin of human traffic, the Middle Passage, and slavery in the Antebellum period, as well as the devastation of human and natural life in countries from the global South in present day global capitalism.

In her theory of the Western Enlightenment colonial co-development of the notions of blackness and animalization as the cornerstone for the construction of humanity through the anti-black abjection of black gender and sexuality (Jackson 3), Jackson describes anti-black animalization as "a relatively distinctive modality of semio-material violence" (23) that is intra-actively conceptual and inscribed or inflicted upon the flesh. Similarly, physical violence is also applied in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* upon the bodies of those whose repression lies at the core of the construction of the acceptable or 'human' in racial, gender, and sexual terms: black low-deckers are likened to dogs and other animals by the authorities (11). The binary sex system is known as the Holy Order and Tarlanders—most of them intersex due to hormonal imbalances—are said to come from the Realm of Chaos that reigned before the Heavens overruled it (Solomon 19). Homosexuality and abortion are punished with public whippings and imprisonment (52, 158), and guards randomly rape, beat, and humiliate lower deck women without any legal consequence (64, 173,

174, 194). As Chiara Pellegrini remarks, since "gender is something performed and then imposed on others by the wealthy and white upper-deckers, […] the relationship to gender that characters like Aster develop is inseparable from the system oppressing them" (503).

In this context, Aster and Theo's defiance of the cis-heteropatriarchal establishment acquires special relevance. Under the guise of "routine vaccinations," Theo chemically castrates "all the upperdeck men listed in the records of the ship's reproduction programs" (44) implemented by the Sovereign's policy to perpetuate the slavery-based socioeconomic system, especially through the state-sanctioned rape of low-deck women. With Aster's aid, he also performs abortions on black women and girls seeking to terminate their unwanted pregnancies, which result from the rape committed by white guards as part of the same breeding programs. Equally important, he collaborates in Aster's act of willful body agency when she decides to have her uterus and breasts removed, and acts on his own body and gender by having Aster make for him a testosterone antagonist that helps him cope with his post-poliomyelitis syndrome. Besides, both characters relish their gender indefinability as a site of resistance against the strictures imposed by the establishment. As Aster tells Theo: "I am a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one very strange, flimsy, indecisive body. Do you think my body couldn't decide what it wanted to be?"—to which he replies: "I think it doesn't matter because we get to decide what our bodies are or are not" (308). He refers to his own "unnatural girlishness, […] sissyness and sickliness" (99) as a child and affirms that "People do not know what to make of me, and this pleases me. I don't want to be scrutable" (106). Yet, Theo's gender deviance is tolerated because, as the late Sovereign's offspring and as the Surgeon General able to perform medical miracles, he is worshiped as a holy, superior being and respected as a military authority.

QUEER RADICAL KINSHIP AS RESISTANCE

Theo and Aster's commitment to one another and to their queer relationship is the cornerstone of an empowering kinship that is nourished by their shared antagonism to the authorities, in a way that echoes the adoption of the term Black with a capital letter by different immigrant communities in the 1950s United Kingdom as "a political signifier denoting coalition," referring to "a form of solidarity rather than to an ethnic identity" (Prieto López 1, 2). Their kinship takes us

back to the notion of Black utopia as "antithetical to Afropessimism, which expresses the impossibility of overcoming anti-blackness, foreclosing the possibility of meaningful cross-racial solidarity" (de Bruin-Molé 114). Theo and Aster develop a profound radical bond that transcends their racial and class differences; this bond relies on their sharing "a common goal and a common enemy" (115); following Miriyam Aouragh, it is "a radical alternative based on […] a kinship of equality; a universalism grounded in resistance" (Aouragh 16). Even though Theo is highly respected, he is emotionally and verbally abused by his father for his effeminacy, just as Aster is called dog and rat for her social and racial status and "*simple, dumb, defective, half-witted dog*" (23) for her neurodivergent behavioral traits. Both characters can be ranged within the scope of Butler's definition of precarious lives that are not grievable and therefore do not matter (xiv) or less than human bodies for their difference from the mainstream. In opposition to their common enemy, embodied by the oppressive regime ruling *Matilda*, Aster and Theo develop a partnership that "revolved around sewing up each other's various wounds. They'd become intimately familiar with each other's frailties. Theo knew her every brittle bit" (Solomon 80). As Édouard Glissant elaborates in his *Poetics of Relation* (1997), relation in the Black experience is made up of "shared knowledge" of "the experience of the abyss" (8) of the slave boats and the ocean deep, acquiring a rhizomatic dimension whereby "every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11), especially "by taking up the problems of the Other" (18).

The challenge of Aster and Theo's queer connection being emotional as well as eventually sexual can be read in the light of Jayna Brown's view of desire and its fulfillment "as deeply political in the context of black life, […] as relational and charged with the potential to explode all attempts to order and contain it" (Brown 14). As Brown argues, in the context of the historical commodification, dispossession, and abjection of black bodies, the act of reclaiming one's corporeal self and relishing its bodily pleasures becomes a site of resistance, contestation, and empowerment. Audre Lorde already pointed out that the power of the erotic "comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (56), as is the case of Aster and Theo's common struggle against the system of oppression. Furthermore, she vindicated the sharing of joy as a "self-affirming" tool for black lesbians "in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (59). Despite the physical abuse and exploitation of black bodies by the white guards, from which Aster detaches herself by daily

applying an anesthetic serum to her vulva in case she happens to be raped, she is capable of embracing her desire for Theo and enjoying his performance of oral sex on her. De Bruin-Molé acknowledges kernels of utopia as "a state of being and doing," borrowing Brown's terms (Brown 1), in expressions of black joy that entail "recognizing joy and desire in one's body despite the dystopian forces that work to eradicate it, and desiring love, solidarity, and kinship with others *in spite of* the obstacles of [their] reality (in both senses of 'in spite')" (de Bruin-Molé 109; original emphasis). To quote Brown again: "Moments of utopia happen through the gratification of sensual desires" (10) and, in this particular case, they also open up new queer possibilities of kinship and commonality.

In a parallel way, queer, radical kinship takes some other shapes beyond family and blood ties in the novel. Aster and her psychotic black friend Giselle, for instance, are described as "sisters, in spirit if not in blood" (Solomon 181). As the narrator puts it, Aster calls her "*sister* because she knew sisters could not choose to unsister themselves when their lives diverged dramatically. Friends who hated each other were no longer friends. Sisters who hated each other remained sisters, despite long silences, feuds, and deliberate misunderstandings" (204). Furthermore, Aster's life is intertwined with that of all the lower deck residents that endure the cruelty inflicted by the Sovereign's guards, just like Aint Melusine loves all the girls and women she has looked after throughout her life, as a nanny on the upper decks and as a teacher to the children on Q deck, her bond transcending social and racial barriers. All Tarlanders, indeed, create nonnormative kinship communities composed of intersex orphans and infertile low-deckers: "queer communities of aunts, adoptees, and configurations of relationships and family that do not conform to a binary sex/gender system" (Obourn 202). In other words, they create a queer version of extended families whose "affective ties and networks of social support" (Willey 240) decenter the domain of the heterosexual couple and the institution of marriage on which upper-deck society is based. They engage in what Angela Willey calls the "cooperative living [...] at the heart of a dyke ethics of antimonogamy" (245), which is based on "a kind of solidarity characterized more by commitment to community than by what we might characterize as affective attachment" (241), mirroring the bonding and webs of affective support that the queer communities have traditionally nourished as substitutes for the normative nuclear family.

Finally, Aster's love for nonhuman nature materializes in her breeding and care for different species in her botanarium, where she prepares medical and natural remedies to heal the ill and wounded residents of the lower decks. As Hannah Schultz points out, "[e]cological knowledge developed through working with the land within the plantation structure both links the Tarlanders with an ancestral past, or a material history of transatlantic enslavement, and sets the stage for Aster's resistance as a healer" (Schultz 725). Aster's hand in Tarlanders' abortions mirrors the fact that, in the Antebellum period, "enslaved women used botanical science to control their own reproduction" (726). In opposition to *Matilda*'s reproduction programs, she chooses "to reproduce via botanical breeding" (726), treating her plants and trees as if they were her children. She "kisses bugs. Leaves of plants. Microscopes. Paper. The muzzles of the draft horses" (Solomon 105); "the florae in her botanarium" are described as "her progeny, and she her mother" (181). Besides relating to inanimate objects, animals, and plants in an egalitarian way, her love for them endows these entities with animacy, as Obourn posits (203). The intensity of Aster's love for her natural progeny is measured by the fact that, when Giselle gets jealous of Aster's romantic bond with Theo, she redirects her rage towards Aster's plants and trees, setting fire to her botanarium and destroying all that mattered to her, including her mother's encoded notes and diaries.

However, despite Giselle's destruction of Lune's intel, and after igniting a mass revolt triggered by Giselle's suicide to avoid public execution, Aster eventually manages to return to the Earth in the shuttle where her mother had died while repairing it, thus succeeding in her own particular exodus from slavery. On beholding the Earth from outer space, she describes the planet as "the Heavens, a perfect tangled mess of plant life so large, so big, so colossal, it equalled one hundred *Matildas*" (Solomon 347), with "the largest trees she'd ever encountered" (348). As the narrator ponders: "Aster didn't know what tragedy had befallen this place, but time seemed to have erased it" (348). Upon arrival, Aster lays her mother's bones and Giselle's corpse in a hole on the ground and interlaces her fingers with Giselle's. The plot in the novel was propelled by Aster's metaphysical search for her black mother and ends, as Obourn puts it, with her "finding her body, decoding her messages, and all three characters—Aster, Giselle, and Lune—held in 'the black dirt' (349) […], literally returning Aster to the earth from which humanity originated" (215, 198).

CONCLUSION

Aster's return to the earth thus provides the novel with a sense of closure despite its blatant open-endedness. Zamalin significantly highlights the positive effects of Black utopias usually being left unelaborated; rather than "a failure of imagination," this feature entails "a defense of keeping alive the horizon, which would exist as unfulfilled possibility" (Zamalin 14). This very open ending somehow brings to the fore the conception of life as the essence of Aster's identity: the very act of being alive is what endows Aster with dignity and the right to be respected, not to be unwillingly touched or called names. Her insistence on the mere fact of being alive as the basis of dignity and respect resonates with Kevin Quashie's notion of Black aliveness, the eruption of life "in the midst and aftermath" of the "interminable conditions" of coloniality, captivity, and death. As he eloquently puts it: "An antiblack world expects blackness from black people; in a black world, what we expect and get from black people is beingness" (10). Nevertheless, the protagonist's escape from *Matilda* is not an isolated and selfish act of rebellion—nor is it the only kernel of hope that opens up the possibility of a better future, in this case in the form of a direct blending with a rich natural environment. Before leaving the ship, she sparks an organized revolt whereby Lieutenant—the new Sovereign after Sovereign Nicolaeus's death by exposure to siluminium—is killed in front of the whole low-deck population, who in turn engage in an armed riot against the guards' force with the fire weapons distributed under Aster's and Theo's leadership. The chance for social revolution is thus ignited and the end of the plantation system envisaged in the novel's open (and violent) but hopeful ending.

Despite the dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenario that frames all actions and events in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Solomon's novel reveals as a magnificent case of Black utopia according to Zamalin's definition in so far as it offers a double seed and path for utopia: through Aster's escape from slavery into a rebirth on and with the earth, and through the dismantling of the slave plantation system that is envisioned for those who stay within the Matildan universe—which is, we should not forget, also approaching the earth. The novel's open ending therefore makes possible a future return to the planet of a society that may finally abolish the tyrannical white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal biopolitical system on which it is based. This revolution stems from the seizing of body agency and development of queer radical kinship beyond the human-nonhuman binarism on the

part of characters from the range of less than human disposable bodies—the *homo sacer* that eventually gain for themselves the status of sovereign subjects. What is more, the choice of a heterodiegetic narrator that delegates internal focalization on a neurodivergent character places her idiosyncratic perspective and approach to life center stage, affording them not only visibility but also a vital sense of empowerment. All in all, such positionings illustrate the potential of bringing together the tenets of critical posthumanism and black antihumanism for a utopian dismantling of the oppressions historically built upon liberal humanist exclusionary ethics and the universalist, exceptionalist ideals that originally sanctioned race and gender-based brutality in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was supported by the research project pid2022-137627nb-i00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ and ERDF "A way of making Europe" and the research group H03_23R funded by the Aragonese Regional Government (DGA).

WORKS CITED

AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford UP, 1998.

AOURAGH, Miriyam. "'White Privilege' and Shortcuts to Anti-Racism." *Race & Class*, vol. 61, 2019, pp. 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819874629.

BACCOLINI, Raffaella. "Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia." *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, no. 3, 2006, pp. 1–4. https://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/3056.pdf

BARNWELL, Andrea D. "Like the Gypsy's Daughter or Beyond the Potency of Josephine Baker's Eroticism." *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Richard J. Powell and David A. Bailey, U of California P, 1997, pp. 82–89.

BENNETT, Joshua. *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2020.

BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013.

BROWN, Jayna. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*. Duke UP, 2021.

BUTLER, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2006.

CLEVELAND, Kimberly. *Africanfuturism: African Imaginings of Other Times, Spaces, and Worlds*. Cambridge UP, 2024. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.16275965.

DE BRUIN-MOLÉ, Megen. "Salvaging Utopia: Lessons for (and from) the Left in Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), *The Deep* (2019), and *Sorrowland* (2021)." *Humanities*, Vol. 10, no. 4, 2021, pp. 109–19. https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040109.

FALCK, Alex. "An Interview with Author Rivers Solomon." *Intellectual Freedom Blog*, 10 October 2018, https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/an-interview-with-author-rivers-solomon/. Accessed 10 May 2025.

FINCH, Megan. "Missing Mothers of the Afropocene: *Parable of the Sower* and Octavia Butler's Legacy in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2024, pp. 20–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2024.2318691.

GLISSANT, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, U of Michigan P, 1997. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10257.

JACKSON, Zakiyyan Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. New York UP, 2020.

LORDE, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic in Power." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde, Crossing Press, Freedom, 1984, pp. 53–59.

MBEMBE, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.

OBOURN, Milo. "'Are You Now So Deluded You Think You Exist Outside the Category of Everything?': A Posthumanist Critical Disability Analysis of Black Motherhood Beyond Cisgenderism in Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*." *Experimental Subjectivities in Global Black Women's Writing: Race and Narrative Innovation*, edited by Sheldon

George and Jean Wyatt, Bloomsbury, 2024, pp. 197–210. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350383500.ch-008.

PELLEGRINI, Chiara. "Temporalities Beyond Transition: Form, Genre, and Contemporary Trans Novels." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2023, pp. 492–508. https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2023.a913308.

PRIETO LÓPEZ, Paola. *Black Women Centre Stage: Diasporic Solidarity in Contemporary Black British Theatre.* Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003393627.

QUASHIE, Kevin. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Duke UP, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478021322.

SCHULTZ, Hannah. "Ecological Identity and Resistance in the Plantationocene: Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2024, pp. 719–33. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isad034.

SOLOMON, Rivers. *An Unkindness of Ghosts.* Akashic Books, 2017.

SOLOMON, Rivers. *Model Home*. MCD, 2024.

SOLOMON, Rivers. *Sorrowland*. Merky Books, 2021.

SOLOMON, Rivers. *The Deep*. Hodeer and Stoughton, 2019.

WATKINS, Claire Vaye. "Magical Systems and Fusion Reactors: Rivers Solomon Discusses *An Unkindness of Ghosts*." *The Rumpus*, 26 September 2017. https://therumpus.net/2017/09/26/the-rumpus-interview-with-rivers-solomon/. Accessed 3 June 2025.

WILLEY, Angela. "Rethinking Monogamy's Nature: From the Truth of Non/Monogamy to a Dyke Ethics of 'Antimonogamy.'" *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2018, pp. 235–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2017.1340006.

YERGEAU, M. Remi. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Duke UP, 2018.

ZAMALIN, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia UP, 2019. https://doi.org/10.7312/zama18740.