

**Process Thought and Womanist Theology:
Black Women’s Science Fiction as a Resource for Process Theology**
By Monica A. Coleman

Police and fire fighters charge fines and rob citizens more than protecting them. Labor laws are relaxed so that there is no minimum wage and slavery has been revived through “company store” corporations. State borders are closed to out-of-state residents, and water costs more than gasoline. A new drug causes people to want to set fires. Its abusers shave their heads and paint their bodies and burn any and everything they can – including each other. Everyone lives in walled neighborhoods, their residents carrying guns and accustomed to the sight of human corpses in their midst. In one small walled community, a fifteen-year-old black girl rejects the teachings of her Baptist minister father. She begins to write down in verse things she has discovered about her world:

All that you touch
You change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.¹

It is southern California, July 2024. In Octavia Butler’s fictional future world, a young African American woman articulates and spreads the teachings of “Earthseed,” the God-is-change philosophy that she has gleaned from her observations of the world around her. Her thoughts contain many of the same insights of process theology – but they have come in poetic form, out of adversity, and from the mouth and the pen of a Black woman. In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia Butler deftly weaves together the experiences of

¹ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner, 1993) 3.

urban decay, race, gender, science, imagination, the natural world, theology, survival, evolution and hope. Butler simultaneously captures the sentiments of two groups of theologians -- her protagonist seems to be both a process theologian and a womanist theologian. How does Butler accomplish something so elusive, and seemingly unimportant, for scholars in process and womanist theologies? Why is there no academic conversation between process and womanist theologies? Do they seem incompatible? Or are they simply not interested in one another?

Discussions between process and black theologies typically employ language of compatibility, consistency and assessment. Is a process God compatible with the God of black theology who stands unequivocally on the side of the oppressed?² Is the “limited power” of a process God consistent with the power exercised by the God in black theology?³ Can process theology effectively name and combat the structural social evils, especially racism? Can black theology operate effectively without a metaphysical or “rational” foundation?⁴ This has been the tenor of the conversation between black and process theologians. Yet there are actually a number of similarities between black theology and process theology. Both process and black theologies express dissatisfaction with the world as it is, a desire for liberation and freedom, a privileging of empiricism, a social or relational view of reality and the importance of God. Yet they diverge on issues of naming the enemy, philosophy and praxis, the metaphysical and the empirical, social location and dualism.⁵ Process and black theologians’ skeptical mutual assessments have ended in the work of three black process theologians and a larger scale rejection of the entire project.

² See Theodore Walker, Jr., “Hartshorne’s Neoclassical Theism and Black Theology” *Process Studies* 18, no.4 (Winter, 1989): 240-58 and Henry Young, “Process Theology and Black Liberation: Testing the Metaphysical Foundations.” *Process Studies* 18, no.4 (Winter, 1989): 259-67.

³ Ronald C. Potter, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in Process and Black Theologies.” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Center* 12, nos.1-2 (Fall, 1984-Spring, 1985): 50-61.

⁴ Schubert Ogden, *Faith and Freedom*

⁵ Gene Reeves, “Liberation: Process Theology and Black Experience,” *Process Studies* 18.4, 225-239.

Butler's lyrical combination of race, gender, science and process suggests a different direction for dialogue between process thought and black theologies, womanist theology, in particular. Clear differences exist between them, yes. Yet both are evolving postmodern theologies with potential for growth in unique directions if they revive the conversation. I believe that resources in womanist theologies can enrich and develop the evolution of process thought. In this lecture, I propose one touch point between process and womanist theologies: the womanist privilege of experience and a proposed use of black women's science fiction as a theological resource. I will begin this lecture with brief outlines of Whiteheadian process thought and womanist theology. I will then discuss the radical empiricism shared by process and womanist theologies. Then I will discuss the womanist use of literature and a short genre study of Black women's science fiction. I will conclude by identifying the ways in which process theology can grow from utilizing Black women's science fiction as a theological resource.

whitehead's philosophy

The most common philosophical source for process theology is the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead's metaphysical philosophy of organism is best summarized in his phrase, "The many become one, and are increased by one." Every unit of reality, from the quark to a human being, is in the process of becoming. "Actual entities," the basic elements composing all things, are constantly in the process of synthesizing a vast diverse past into a subjective, momentary unity. As soon as a new unity is achieved, the new entity contributes itself to the world and becomes one of the many that will be synthesized into a unity in the next moment of experience. This process continues on and on.

Yet the actual entity is not destined to repeat its past over and over again. Entities sift influences received from both the past and a source of novelty. As the actual entity feels the

influence of the past world, it allows some aspects of the past to influence its current becoming, while it negates others. This process of becoming is also influenced by the future possibilities presented to the actual entities in the form of the initial aim from God. In the initial aim, God orders the possibilities to the specific circumstances of each actual entity while luring the actual entity towards the possibility(ies) that maximize harmony and intensity for the whole. The actual entity has the freedom to become its own thing as it is constituted by the past, the initial aim and its self-determined choices.

In Whitehead's model, God is the chief exemplification of his metaphysical principles. The process God is a dipolar actual entity with a primordial nature and a consequent nature. The primordial nature of God contains all the infinite possibilities that will be directed towards the actual entities of the world (in the initial aim). The consequent nature of God receives the actual entities of the world, feeling them as the world has experienced them. Whereas the two natures of God can be separated in abstraction, they form a unity that receives, evaluates and lures the world to a vision of the common good.

Womanist theology

Womanist theology is a response to sexism in black theology and racism in feminist theology. When black theologians spoke of "the black experience," they only included the experience of Black men and boys. They did not address the unique oppression of black women. Feminist theologians, on the other hand, unwittingly spoke only of white women's experience, especially of middle and upper class white women. They did not include issues of race and economics in their critiques. Many womanists also feel that feminist theology operates in opposition to men and anathema to the church. Womanist theologians want to maintain their connection to black men and remain faithful to the church traditions from which they come. The

term “womanist” allows Black women to affirm their identity as black while also owning a connection with feminism.

Linda Thomas defines womanist theology as: “critical reflection upon black women’s place in the world that God has created; it takes seriously black women’s experience as human beings who are made in the image of God; it affirms and critiques the positive and negative attributes of the church, the African American community, and the larger society.”⁶ Womanist theology is known for its analysis of religion and society in light of the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classism that characterizes the experience of many black women. Employing Alice Walker’s definition of womanist in her 1983 collection of essays *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, womanist theology makes significant contributions to the fields of black and liberation theologies.

Empiricism

More than church history, doctrine, philosophy, or biblical interpretation, the experiences of Black women are the starting point and testing ground for all womanist theologies. Delores Williams insists on the primacy of experience writing, “[W]e womanists must be guided more by black Christian women’s voices, faith and experience than by anything that was decided centuries ago at Chalcedon.”⁷ It was also Whitehead’s vision that the actual experience in the world would be the testing ground, and molder of process theology. When Whitehead describes speculative philosophy, he links it to an empirical understanding of the world. While process philosophical systems are best known for their rather complex metaphysics of change and evolution, empirical data always has the final word. In the oft-quoted analogy of the airplane,

⁶ Linda E. Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm” *Cross Currents* 48 (1998-1999): 489.

⁷ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 203.

Whitehead writes that a true method of discovery will start in one field of observation, make flight into the air of generalization and land again for observation in another field where the generalization will be tested, adapted and tried again in yet another field to which the airplane will fly.⁸

Taking the airplane metaphor even further, Whitehead states that the metaphysic is secondary to what we know about the world: “Whatever is found in ‘practice’ must lie within the scope of the metaphysical description. When the description fails to include the ‘practice,’ the metaphysics is inadequate and requires revision.”⁹ The theories of process theology are inseparable from experience in practice. Process theology relies upon data and observation to justify all of its speculation, imagination and generalization.

The majority of process theology documents empirical knowledge of the world through science and philosophy. With such emphasis on science and philosophy, process theology has been able to build a rather solid bridge between science and religion, reason and faith. In his discussion of the relation between experience and speculative philosophy, Whitehead himself highlights the relationship between science and religion.

Yet process theology contains the requisite elements for using a variety of sources in its commitment to experience. Process theologians have been landing in the fields of physics, biology, philosophy and psychology for the last several decades, while underutilizing the fields of history, literature or music. Notable exceptions are the works of feminist process theologians Catherine Keller and Ann Pederson. With history and music, respectively, Keller and Pederson have incorporated the social and aesthetic sciences into their process constructions. But why are they in such a minority? Do process theologians devalue aesthetics in relation to science and

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978) 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

philosophy, or have they simply overlooked it because of their own personal and professional interests? By limiting the sources of data for experience, process theologians have failed to conduct Whitehead's metaphorical airplane test of process metaphysics in a variety of fields of practice.

Womanist theology's use of literature as experience suggests that process theology, also grounded in experience, begin to seriously consider the use of literature, fiction even, as data for its speculative philosophical theology. I suggest a wedding, combining the process emphasis on science and philosophy and the womanist emphasis on history and literature. I go further and suggest that process theology influenced by womanist concerns will experiment with Black women's science fiction. A process theology that uses Black women's science fiction (a) expresses a deeper commitment to Whitehead's method of discovery; (b) expands the circle for studies of religious pluralism; and (c) provides a hope that can be missing from many process theologies.

Womanists and literature

Womanist theologians and ethicists are recognized for the way in which they have diversified the sources for doing theology. In his 1999 summary of Black theology, Dwight Hopkins cites womanist religious scholars as persistently exploring diverse sources of Black women's experiences to provide lessons for today--with literature by Black women as the most widely drawn upon source.¹⁰ The first published book in womanist religious scholarship is *Black Womanist Ethics* by Katie G. Cannon.¹¹ In this work, Cannon explores the writings of Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston and derives both a descriptive and proscriptive ethical code for modern Black women. Cannon wants to access the experience of common people and

¹⁰ Dwight Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999) 156.

¹¹ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

uses a variety of sources – family stories, slave narratives, black folk culture, biblical interpretation, black church history, etc. In a later book, Cannon writes that the African American women’s literary tradition is “the best available literary repository for understanding the ethical values Black women have created and cultivated in their participation in this society.”¹²

Womanist theologians also use Black women’s literature as a source of Black women’s experiences. In a foundational essay on womanist theology, Delores Williams summarizes the use of literature in womanist theology: “Female slave narratives, imaginative literature by black women, autobiographies, the work by black women in academic disciplines and the testimonies of black church women will be authoritative sources for womanist theologians.”¹³ For Williams, literature (and testimony) by black women will serve as a way of defining the experiences of black women. Williams’ comments reflect the current reality of how womanist theologians are using Black women’s literature as a theological source that describes and elucidates the experiences of Black women.

Despite this creative use of Black women’s literature in the construction of womanist theology, womanist theology has limited both the type and purpose of its use of Black women’s literature. Womanist theologians use nineteenth-century slave narratives and autobiographies, as well as twentieth century authors from the Harlem Renaissance and the 1970s and 1980s. After describing these experiences, which are assumed to be representative, womanist theologians make conclusions about how Black women have thought about God, Bible or ethics in the past.

¹² Katie G. Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995) 61.

¹³ Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume two: 1980-1992*. Eds. James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 266.

Experiences from literature thus serve to establish norms and ideas that can be embraced or altered with new information for a working theological or ethical model.

Womanist theologians have not, however, drawn upon Black women's science fiction as a source for theology, overlooking a critical source in the literary field. In "Why Women Can't Write," feminist science fiction writer Joanna Russ offers science fiction as a liberating genre for women, one that welcomes the display of alternative attitudes and cultures. According to Russ, "The science fiction arena is particularly appropriate for introducing figures that challenge traditional literary representations of women."¹⁴ In using science fiction as a source for theology, womanists will find that they will have to use Black women's literature in a new way. Rather than reveal the past experiences of Black women and society, Black women's science fiction provides visions for the future of society. It critiques the current society and offers proposals for "what could be," "what should be" and possibly "what will be." Black women's science fiction will be much more like prophecy than history.

What I am saying is that the conversation between process and black theologies ended before womanist theology really had a chance to enter the conversation. But there is real opportunity for discussion between the two postmodern theologies. Both womanist and process theologies exhibit a radical empiricism – although they do this in different ways. Combining the womanist use of literature and the process use of science leads me to look towards black women's science fiction as a resource for a womanist process theology.

Black women's science fiction

Black women's science fiction is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves. The term science fiction has led most critics to review only the work of Octavia Butler, but blacks

¹⁴ Joanna Russ. "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Comillon (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green U Popular Press 1972) 18.

have been writing utopic, speculative and fantastic literature for over 100 years. Kristina Nwazota cites magic realism and time travel into the distant past as characteristics of black science fiction or “speculative fiction.” Looking at black science fiction with this lens includes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*.¹⁵ Even without that stretch of genre, there are rising numbers of Black science fiction writers, many of them female. In addition to Octavia Butler, Linda Addison, Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson and Nisi Shawl (to name just a few) are constantly adding to the ranks of Black female science fiction writers. Black women’s science fiction stands within a long tradition of various genres --utopian writing, science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction. We will see that there are four key aspects of Black women’s science fiction: (1) It is a critique of current society; (2) it is concerned with issues of social justice; (3) it offers possibilities for the future; (4) it changes its readers.

Science fiction can be described as utopian literature that draws upon the resources of science and technology. The word utopia literally means “no place,” while “eutopia” means “the good place.” As the good place that is no place, utopias are depictions of ideal societies, that don’t really exist. In “Understanding Utopian Literature,” Dingbo Wu defines utopian literature as “literary speculation about nonexistent worlds as a critique of the contemporary human society.”¹⁶ Other literary critics state that every author of a utopia pronounces a moral judgment upon the society in which he lives.¹⁷ That is, utopias are constructed out of dissatisfaction with the world as it is.

¹⁵ Kristina Nwazota, “Black Writers Bring a Different Perspective to Sci-Fi” *Black Issues Book Review* 4.1 (Jan-Feb 2002) 29-30.

¹⁶ Dingbo Wu,, “Understanding Utopian Literature” *Extrapolation* 34.3 (Fall 1993) 242

¹⁷ Peyton E. Richter, *Utopia/Dystopia?* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1975) 17

Utopias do more than reject the author's inherited world. Utopias also offer solutions for ways to make that world better. In rather strong language, Joseph Wellbank states that justice is a requirement of utopias. Wellbank identifies four criteria of justice that utopic visions must include. They must establish criteria of justice that are genuine, not just specious; they must provide a theoretical framework for ways in which the demands can be made in the society; they must describe a fair social scheme for the structure of society and do all this from an impartial standpoint.¹⁸ Although these criteria sound close to impossible, Wellbank's thesis is an important one. A utopia is useless if, in its critique of society, it does not imply or provide a picture of justice.

Just as there is the genre of utopia, there is also the genre of anti-utopia or dystopia. Dystopia has much of the same functions of utopia, but it arrives there by painting a picture of hell, rather than of heaven. Dystopia depicts the society in which no one wants to live. Dystopias are traditionally bleak, depressing genres with no space for hope; for example, George Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. There is no learning or escape for the protagonists. The only hope to be found is outside the story. As readers, we can read dystopias as warnings and thus try to escape a pessimistic future.

Feminist and black utopian literature are distinct genres as well. When feminists construct utopias they will look considerably different from those that men portray. In *Women in Search of Utopia*, Ruby Rohrlich states that feminist utopian literature is distinct from its male counterpart in its portrayal of freedom and destruction of hierarchical norms: "For men, utopia is the ideal state; for most women, utopia is stateless and the overcoming of hierarchy and the traditional splits between human beings and nature, subject and other, man and woman, parent

¹⁸ Joseph H. Wellbank, "Utopia and the Constraints of Justice." *Utopia/ Dystopia?* Ed. Peyton E. Richter (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1975) 33-4.

and child.”¹⁹ Preston Williams makes similar observations about black perspectives on utopia. Preston Williams states that Blacks have long been participants of utopian visions, and when blacks create utopian visions, they always think in terms of community goals.²⁰ Whether anti-, feminist or black, utopias are formed by their content. Utopias are more than pictures of the perfect society. They are critiques of the contemporary social order.

Black women’s science fiction is also influenced by feminist science fiction. Feminist science fiction produces texts where gender and identity are central and new social orders include new sexualities and new genders, as well. Literary critic Jenny Wolmark thinks of feminist science fiction as a literature that not only presents possibilities, but alternatives. Critic Camille Bacon-Smith reminds us that the alternative worlds are not always utopic; sometimes they as problematic as the world in which the reader currently lives. Rather than positing one idea, feminist science fiction writers write in thought-experiments. Their writing says, “What if . . .” or “Let’s try . . .” or “what would we get if . . .” or “I wished I could live like . . .” This is the aspect that is often called “speculative.”

Literary critic Marleen Barr emphasizes this speculative nature of women’s science fiction and prefers the term “feminist speculative fiction’ to include feminist utopians, science fiction, fantasy, and sword and sorcery.”²¹ She is convinced that this genre is ideal for the feminist agenda. Because the writers are not hindered by the constraints of patriarchal social reality, they can imagine presently impossible possibilities for women. Barr identifies the themes of community, heroism and sexuality & reproduction as primary themes of feminist

¹⁹ Ruby Rohrlich and Baruch, Elaine Hoffman, eds. *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984) xii

²⁰ Preston Williams, “Black Perspectives on Utopia.” *Utopia/ Dystopia?* Ed. Peyton E. Richter (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1975) 45-46.

²¹Marleen Barr, *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) note 1 xxii

speculative literature. The female protagonists of feminist speculative fiction destroy patriarchal ideas of “femininity.” Women who form communities, become heroes, and take charge of their sexuality behave in a manner that is alien to the established concept of femininity—they show women with mastery and competence.

Barr is also one of the few critics who note the ways in which Black women’s speculative fiction is different from that of white women. Whereas feminist speculative fiction has tended to banish men from their ideal communities, “womanist speculative fiction” creates societies where “women co-exist with men, retain their female characteristics, and function as powerful individuals.”²² The heroines of womanist speculative fiction work with men and the men are crucial to the development of the female hero. That is, the heroes of womanist speculative fiction are successful not just by brute force, but by combining their own and others’ knowledge. Barr concludes that womanist speculative fiction conforms to Alice Walker’s definition of womanist.

Black women’s science fiction changes the world. Rather than showing women in marginal roles to a male hero, it offers women the possibility to receive support from men. It provides pictures of new relationships between men and women. The protagonist in womanist speculative fiction changes the imperfect world of the novel and strives to create new societies with new values. Second, these protagonists change their worlds not by sacrificing love for power, but by combining special powers with commitments to others. The authors summon us to rebuild society and make it possible for female heroes to experience both love and public importance.

Deeply rooted in the traditions of utopia, feminism, and science fiction (not to mention the African American literary tradition), Black women’s science fiction does not easily fit into

²² Ibid. 61

one genre. Yet this quick purview of the overlapping genres suggests that there are markers of Black women's science fiction. Like the utopia, black women's science fiction offers an ideal society that does not currently exist. It is also a critique of current society – including its patriarchy and limiting roles for men and women. It is interested in freedom, justice and ethics for the entire community. But it does not just offer one perfect idea – it is speculative. Black women's science fiction offers possibilities and alternatives for the future. In so doing, it changes its readers – encouraging them to rebuild society into the kind of place it can be, or from being the kind of place it could be if we are not careful. Because of these functions, critic Dingbo Wu suggests that there is a connection between utopian literature and spirituality: “Utopian literature serves as a spiritual guide demonstrating values and experiences of alternative societies that are in some ways better or worse than the readers’ world.”²³

Religion and science fiction

American Christians did not warmly welcome the early popularity of science fiction. Some critics, such as John Lawing, argue that science fiction ignores issues of religion. Others, like Thomas Molnar, critique science fiction for offering salvation without divinity. He rejects utopian literature for claiming that salvation can be achieved in history and that people can perfect their natures by their own efforts and remove all evils from their environment. It is “a kind of permanent heresy which leads [humans] astray, diverting [them] from the true path to salvation through faith in the supernatural.”²⁴ On the other hand, some religious scholars have embraced science fiction. They see it as either a new religion or a sign that post-modernity must interact with religion.

²³ Wu 243

²⁴ Qtd. From Richter 9.

Stephen May concurs with Molnar that science fiction offers a secular salvation, but does not see this as negative. Science fiction may portray humanity as God, aliens as “god-replacements” or a divine universe into which humanity is merged. May argues that science fiction actually indicates a deep spiritual need within society. Science fiction presents specifically theological concerns – evil, apocalypse, salvation. Parker Rossman also embraces the religious study of science fiction. He claims that science fiction writers are the greatest philosophers of the 20th century and science fiction serves as the voice of our conscience, and the voice of God.

Black women’s science fiction often demonstrates overt religious references. Like African American religion itself, the religious elements of Black women’s science fiction encompass a variety of religious sources, including the curious combination of both Christianity and indigenous religious traditions. Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* takes place in the Gullah islands where wisdom and command of conjure frame the respect for the matriarch, Mama Day.²⁵ Mama Day’s beneficent use of conjure heals her granddaughter from both the ills of the contemporary world and the evil conjure that have plagued and sickened her. Octavia Butler’s protagonist in the *Parable* series is given a Yoruba middle and surname which related to traditional West African religion. Her daughter comments about the name:

Her second name was ‘Oya.’ I wonder whatever possessed my Baptist minister grandfather to give her such a name. What did he see in her? ‘Oya’ is the name of a Nigerian Orisha—goddess—of the Yoruba people. In fact, the original Oya was the goddess of the Niger River, a dynamic, dangerous entity, she was also goddess of the wind, fire, and death, more bringers of great change.”²⁶

This name ties Butler’s process-womanist religious construction to the religious traditions of West Africa. More directly, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* explicitly refers to the

²⁵ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York : Vintage Books, 1993).

²⁶ Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Warner Books, 1998) 48.

major orisa of traditional Yoruba religion.²⁷ Although the protagonist initially rejects the “obeah” religion of her grandmother, she comes to embrace her ability to commune with African ancestors. Calling upon their powers is the only way the Caribbean-Canadian protagonist can save her community from the dark powers that drain the life from its inhabitants. From these examples, we see that some Black women’s science fiction refers to traditional African religion as both a source of strength and cure for society. It moves beyond a simple critique or embrace of Christianity and opens the door for the strong role that African traditional religions play in the lives of Black women.

To quickly summarize, by genre alone, Black women’s science fiction is positioned to offer its readers numerous resources – it critiques current society and offers an alternative vision of society – one that includes portraits of justice, community, feminism and sexual equality. This genre addresses some of the problems of the day and creatively suggests solutions. There seems to be a religious function to the genre. More explicitly, Black women’s science fiction reflects the uniqueness of Black religion. We will now see how that shapes a womanist process theology.

Using Black women’s science fiction as a theological resource will stretch both womanist and process theologies in new directions. As Black women’s science fiction includes elements of traditional African religions, it pushes womanist theology to consider non-Christian religions within its scope. Black women’s science fiction also ensures that womanist literature is not limited to serving as a source for describing the past experiences of Black women. Black women’s literature can also have a proscriptive function. Black women’s science fiction can tell us what has happened, yes, but it will also provide concrete images, models and proposals for what *could* happen and/or what *should* happen. A womanist use of science fiction pushes

²⁷ Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Warner Books, 1998).

womanist theology to explore lessons from the hard sciences. In so doing, Black women's science fiction gives teeth to the eschatological vision. It gives content and possibilities. Some visions provided by Black women's science fiction may prove untenable and undesirable. Or we may conclude that they are just what we needed, ideas that have not yet found voice and specificity. By its form and content, Black women's science fiction issues womanist theology into the future.

A venture into the use of science fiction as a theological source offers a smooth transition from the process focus on the hard sciences to a foray into literature and other aesthetic sciences. Science fiction combines the insights of science, technology and concrete empiricism with imagination and social critique. Process theology can begin to balance its rational and empirical side with imagination, justice concerns, and, to use Pedersen's term, improvisation.²⁸ In fact, many literary critics describe the process of writing science fiction in similar language to Whitehead's concept of concrecence. Frederick Pohl says that science fiction writers look at the world, take out some part, throw away others and replace them with new parts. They reassemble the changed world and see how it works.²⁹ Science fiction's offer of new possibilities is a potent source of novelty. Science fiction embraces one of the key concepts of process metaphysics -- sifting through the inputs of the past and relevant possibilities and creating a new thing and projecting this vision into the world. Science fiction concreces.

The use of Black women's science fiction as a theological resource allows process theologians to receive a meaningful gift from womanists, moving process theology in three important directions. First, it offers process theology a deeper commitment to Whitehead's

²⁸ In the last decade, process theologians have become increasingly interested in concerns of social justice. In the last ten to twelve years, Cobb's books have provided examinations of ecological and economic injustices with a process proposal for addressing them. Cobb is not the only one interested in these issues. In 1999, The Center for Process Studies held a revolutionary conference entitled: "Human Rights in Process Perspectives."

²⁹ Frederik Pohl, "The Politics of Prophecy" *Extrapolation*. 34.3 (Fall 1993) 200.

airplane metaphor for testing truth. Black women's science fiction is yet another field in which the plane of process must land. If a process metaphysic cannot land in the field of literature, it needs to be revised. Yet, the combination of science and fiction may reassure and strengthen the process metaphysic. The experiences and visions of African Americans, Black women in particular, may not be so foreign to the speculative philosophy of process thought. A process theology using Black women's science fiction will hear voices from the literary community, the scientific community and African American communities. When process theology explicitly considers the experiences of Black Americans, new ground will open for conversation between process and black theologies.

Second, a process theology that incorporates Black women's science fiction expands the circle for conversations in religious pluralism. Griffin, Cobb, Suchocki, Gene Reeves, Joseph Bracken and many other process theologians express strong convictions of religious pluralism and have explored the connections between Christianity and Buddhism through the lens of process thought. They suggest that a process metaphysic may be, at the most, a common thread, and at the least, a starting point, for interreligious discussions. Yet process' religious pluralism suffers from the same myopia as the broader field of religious pluralism; it tends to equate "religions" with Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Because much of Black women's science fiction invokes African traditional religions and their New World variants, a process theology that uses Black women's science fiction will enter into conversation with African traditional religions. Bringing African traditional religions into the pluralist discussion can lead to the inclusion of other indigenous religious traditions, and will, by necessity, mean extended dialogue with anthropology and art history, as well.

Third, a process theology that incorporates Black women's science fiction can provide a hope that can be missing from many process theologies. While process theology does not exclude hope, there is no guarantee of a happy ending. The future of the world is the result of the cooperative effort between God and the world. Experience has shown us that humanity often chooses options that do not affirm life. If we continue to make these choices, evil may win out over good. This stark realism has resulted in accusations of pessimism and hopelessness against process theology. While process theologians have persistently refuted this critique, a process theology using Black women's science fiction will drive their rebuttal home. Black women's science fiction may not save the entire world, but it often reconfigures social and gender relations in ways that re-conceive encouraging visions of the future from the point of view of feminist, womanist and black theologies. It points to another way, requiring change of us as individuals and as society in order to arrive at a better vision. Womanist theology offers process theology the gift of literature and, in Black women's science fiction, the gift of imaginative challenge. Black women's science fiction challenges us, frightens us and makes demands of us. Using imagination and just-enough-distance-for-us-to-see-ourselves, Black women's science fiction subtly changes its readers to change the world.