

Not Another Cog in the Biopolitical Machine: K. Ceres Wright and Afrofuturist Cyberfunk



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The cyberpunk movement has a well-documented history¹ that I'll gloss over as an introduction to this paper. First, although there are plenty of literary precursors to the movement's emergence in the early-1980s, including (but not limited to) Samuel Delany, Harlan Ellison, J. G. Ballard, John Brunner, James Tiptree, Jr., Joanna Russ, Philip K. Dick, and Thomas Pynchon, cyberpunk's oft-cited core is the quintet of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, and John Shirley. Thanks in part to such editors as Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois, and Stephen Brown, these newcomers' writings brought them into one another's orbit and the impact of their fictional output was quickly irrefutable, particularly after Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) became the first novel to win the Philip K. Dick Award (1984), Hugo Award (1985), and Nebula Award (1985) for Best Novel. Print-based cyberpunk soon expanded its roster, chiefly thanks to the marketing savviness of Bruce Sterling and his edited collection *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986). Meanwhile, cyberpunk's dominant visual splendor—i.e., the simultaneously sprawling but also vertical cities; the overlay of virtual and 'real' worlds; the proliferation of cyborgs, virtual entities, and artificial intelligences; etc.²—was codified by a trifecta of Hollywood films: *TRON* (dir. Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), and *Videodrome* (dir. David Cronenberg, 1983). In his coverage of *Blade Runner*, Scott Bukatman remarked that "cyberpunk provided the image of the future in the 1980s [...] the aesthetic of cyberpunk was almost defined by *Blade Runner* (58:50), although Scott admits he inherited this aesthetic in part from the visual stylings of French cartoonist Jean "Moebius" Giraud, particularly his illustrations for Dan O'Bannon's "The Long Tomorrow" published in *Métal Hurlant* #7 and #8 (1976) before being republished in English in *Heavy Metal* #4 and #5 (1977).³ Finally, Brian Ruh writes that "Japanese elements permeate many of this mode's foundational texts, and Japan continues to produce many important cyberpunk examples that push the ideas and concepts central to this mode, particularly as the synthesis of human and machine so central to cyberpunk's core becomes more and more a part of our quotidian realities" (401). It is this quotidian reality—i.e., a reality (or realities) that many (including myself) have argued looks increasingly cyberpunk-ish—that fuels not only the ongoing engagement with cyberpunk motifs by successive waves of (literary, cinematic, acoustic, and so forth) artists but the adaptation and evolution of these motifs to suit contemporary conditions. It is within these cyberpunk currents that we can locate sf newcomer K. Ceres Wright.

As per her online bio, Wright "received her master's degree in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University and her published cyberpunk novel, *Cog* [2013], was her thesis for the

program” (“About”). In addition to *Cog*, she has written a handful of short stories for various anthologies and she recently founded the Diverse Writers and Artists of Speculative Fiction (DWASF), an educational group appealing to “underrepresented creatives in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all of their related subgenres.” She is currently the organization’s president. Finally, as she has remarked to the Midwest Black Speculative Fiction Alliance, cyberpunk has been foundational to her craft: she first encountered Gibson’s *Neuromancer* in the early 2000s, and *Cog* was a deliberate attempt to write in a Gibsonian vein, although she is by no means merely copying Gibson’s work, either then or now (“Interview”).

Let me circle back to why I’m focusing on Wright, and it has to do with what Isiah Lavender III has written about Steven Barnes, whose contributions to cyberpunk have “gone largely overlooked, in part because of the mode’s monochromatism” (14). Specifically, writing on Barnes’s *Streetlethal* (1983), Lavender positions Barnes as “the only Black cyberpunk writer working in the heyday of [cyberpunk’s] first iteration” (14). More to the point, however, Barnes’s work foreshadowed “Afrocyberpunk or cyberfunk, recent divergences made by black writers from cyberpunk’s norms” (Lavender, “Critical” 308). Wright epitomizes these recent divergences in her Afrofuturist cyberpunk, although I’ll come back to that term in a minute. In the meantime, consider her short story “Talismaner” (2021) which is set on the planet Yemaya, named after the Ocean Mother Goddess in Santería, an Afro-Caribbean religion practiced around the world whose roots stretch to the Yoruba religion (Snider). The story follows Tala, who is scrabbling to pull herself and her family out of the slums of Waneta, and in so doing she turns to techno-biological implants so she can become a shamhack, someone who can hack into the planet’s atmospheric waves and siphon energy, albeit illegally and with inconsistent reliability. After her implants, however, Tala learns she is a Talismaner, a once-in-a-lifetime shamhack who can not only draw forth energy but pull objects through energy conduits and even move people through space. Of course, her abilities draw the attention of the powerful socio-economic elites, and although Tala’s life is threatened, she also portends a brighter future because she can make meaningful change for those disenfranchised by the current socio-economic cleavages that define Yemaya’s social fabric.

Meanwhile, in Wright’s story “Mission: Surreality,” the protagonist is Concordat, an information broker, street hustler, and nascent rebel who lives in the City, a sprawling urban city made of “20 million souls, 1500 different species all crammed together in plascrete and biosteel” (Davis, “Welcome”). Tellingly, every person in the City is implanted with the Tell, a series of subdermal techno-organic implants that allow Cityzens to access a cyberspatial network called the Wave; unfortunately, the Tell also allows Watchers to monitor Cityzens to ensure compliance with the City’s rules. When a Cityzen named Shai Gea learns how to synthesize something called Ooze that will purge all traces of the Tell from a person’s body, Concordat is tasked with brokering the funding that will allow Gea to start mass production and distribution. And, as might be expected, Concordat’s actions in this enterprise bring her to the attention of Watchers that threaten to derail the entire venture.

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“Mission: Surreality” was first published in *The City: A Cyberfunk Anthology*, edited by Milton J. Davis and published in 2015, followed by a soundtrack made available on Spotify in 2019; “Talismaner,” meanwhile, was published in 2021 in Davis’s edited anthology *Cyberfunk!*. The promotional material for cyberfunk describes it as “a vision of the future with an Afrocentric flavor. It is the Singularity without the Eurocentric foundation. It’s Blade Runner with sunlight, *Neuromancer* with melanin, cybernetics with rhythm” (Cover). And, if you recall from a few paragraphs ago, Afrocyberpunk or cyberfunk are “recent divergences made by black writers from cyberpunk’s norms” (Lavender, “Critical” 308). In fact, Wright observes that contemporary cyberpunk trends “toward settings in the far future, on distant planets, where the landscape is not quite as bleak, where corporations do not dominate every aspect of life, and where characters have sunny dispositions” (“Cyberpunk”). Although Wright never uses the term *cyberfunk* in this description, her Afrofuturist cyberpunk is perhaps better described as cyberfunk: a modern articulation of cyberpunk that finds “old beliefs [...] juxtaposed against futuristic inventions” (Wright, “Cyberpunk”).

Cyberfunk is a very provocative term because there is a play of contrary dispositions: first, cyber is a reference to the intimate feedback loops involved in information processing, but it also evokes what has been called *cyber-capitalism*,⁴ which “does not signal a utopian postindustrial, post-Fordist world characterized by creativity and global cooperation. Such neoliberal notions [...] simply mask the exploitative nature of the labor that underlies cyber-capitalism as with all capitalist formations” (English and Kim 223). Similarly, funk calls to mind the Afrofuturist soundscapes of, among others, Sun Ra, who, as per Ytasha L. Womack, “believed that music and technology could heal and transform the world” (53). At the same time, in the common vernacular, funk is a state of unhappiness, depression, or outright despair. We can therefore see in the term *cyberfunk* both a cybernetically infused transformative potential organized around a communal identity and a cybernetically infused despair organized arising from the failures of a utopian postindustrial, post-Fordist world. Wright’s cyberfunk expertly navigates this complicated terrain.

Consider Wright’s short story “Of Sound Mind and Body” (2017). The story follows Dara Martin, a woman who, thanks to an experimental treatment, can transform herself on a cellular level at will, although not without a fair amount of gradually intensifying pain. Dara is an undercover agent with Homeland Intelligence, and in her disguise as Chyou Sòng she has spent the past five months trying to learn what China’s Minister of Commerce Enlai Chin is planning regarding upcoming trade talks, a mission that has had her flirting and now going on a date with Yuan Chin, the Minister’s brother. She also crosses paths with the suspicious Githinji Diallo, and Dara’s research into this character’s personal history is where Wright provides a very brief overview of “Little Africa,” a very real community in the heart of the city of Guangzhou that is heavily populated by African and African-Chinese immigrants and citizens. Relaying her suspicions about Githinji to her handler, deputy station chief Rona Huang, Dara learns Githinji is also an agent, although he has a separate (and secretive) mission: he is an assassin, and after killing

the Minister of Commerce following Dara's successful extraction of trade information, Githinji turns his sights on Dara who, unfortunately, drowns while trying to escape. The story ends with Rona talking to Jim Roberts, Counselor at the US embassy, who is seemingly unaware that Rona had ordered Githinji to kill Dara after the successful completion of her mission. Rona reveals to Jim "there's a new program the [US] government's overseeing. Downloadable consciousness. We may be able to transfer her personality and memory to another body and start over."

These ideas of recordable experiences, transferable consciousness, and/or the swapping of bodies, coupled with the exploitation of labor that underlies cyber-capitalism, are consistent throughout Wright's cyberfunk. For example, "A Change of Plans" (2020) is set in Addis Ababa, circa 2070, and it follows Dani, a streetwise girl who is living as an information broker to the criminal class, a life very reminiscent of Concordant from "Mission: Surreality." Dani discovers illicit technological chips are making their way out of Kaliti Prison. Much like the Tell from "Mission: Surreality" that allows Watchers in the City to monitor Cityzens, the chips in "A Change of Plans" not only enable surveillance but also moderate behaviour which, in turn, fuels a black market: "The guards torture the prisoners and record their brain scans throughout. Then they transfer those memories and reactions to a chip and sell them to people who buy kink robots and want an authentic experience." Unlike Dara's experience in "Of Sound Mind and Body," however, Dani can extricate herself from her trouble, all while reconnecting with her estranged mother and carving off a more hopeful future for herself, including joining and contributing to a women's monastery that gives assistance to a local children's home.

The idea of exploiting the laboring class and generating profits from society's dispossessed and/or most vulnerable informs Wright's debut novel, *Cog*. Published before the aforementioned short stories, *Cog* is arguably the cog that turns the gears on these later stories because many of the motifs and conceptual issues in the short fiction are already nascent in this novel. The novel's chief antagonist (even if his role in the events isn't revealed until later) is William 'Wills' Ryder, the heir apparent to Geren Ryder's American Hologram corporate empire, at least until the arrival of a previously unknown older brother, Perim Nestor, complicates the family dynamics. One of Wills's R&D projects is consciousness transference as well as using a downloaded personality to achieve brain wave parity with a subject to effectively control their mind, albeit on a more subconscious level. And, as part of the beta trials, Wills is investigating the development of clone bodies to achieve consciousness transference, though in the meantime, his most viable candidates are medically fragile comatose patients who effectively have no use for their bodies anymore.

Given the brevity of this paper, I can only gesture towards where this nascent article is heading once it turns into a full-fledged piece, and it has to do with the transhuman condition and what Sherryl Vint calls the biopolitics of epivitality. In *Biopolitical Futures in Twenty-First Century Speculative Fiction*, Vint explains that the biopolitical implications and ramifications of biotechnological advances in the 21st century have created the condition of epivitality; specifically, "neoliberalism and biotechnology demands new ways of thinking about the ongoing reinvention of the idea of life and the living" (2). In other words, biotechnological advances mean that the

flow of “capital becomes interested in humans less for their capacity to provide labour-power and more for their capacity as biological entities” (5). For example, consider the end of the story “Of Sound Mind and Body”: Dara Martin, the undercover agent, is dead but her handler, Rona, tells Jim Roberts, the counselor at the US embassy, that the promising new program of consciousness transference will likely allow Homeland Intelligence to effectively resurrect Dara. When Jim asks Rona if resurrection in a new body is what Dara would have wanted, Rona coldly responds: “Doesn’t matter what she wants. She signed a contract. Her body parts are ours.” Dara’s worth according to the age of epivitality is in her role as what Vint calls the *immortal vessel*, the technological advances organized around “the fetish of preserving and valuing life beyond any limits” that, in turn, is “part of the ongoing reinvention of ‘life itself, enabling a view of living as something that might be engineered, created in the lab” (26). While Dara’s labor is valued while she is alive, her true worth is quite literally in her role as a biological organism. Thus, in this biopolitical age of epivitality, “Of Sound Mind and Body” painfully shows that life is reconfigured “as merely a resource for capital accumulation, as easily liquidated as any other asset” (29); in other words, what is valuable is the human *body*, not the *human* body.

Similarly, consider the suffering prisoners in “A Change of Plans” or, for that matter, the comatose patients in Cog who are the vessels for Wills Ryder’s experiments in transferable consciousness. These figures align with what Vint calls *the living tool* of biopolitics. They throw into sharp relief “the real subsumption of life by capital” by revealing “ways that the gap between organism and thing has decreased, perhaps even collapsed” (47). While Vint turns to the association between robot and slave in science fiction as emblematic of *the living tool*, the conditions of prisoner and comatose patient aren’t far off the mark: their value is as nothing more than an object or raw material in service to the needs of capital. The prisoners in the story help fuel an illicit sex kink trade for wealthy clients while the comatose patients offer the uber-wealthy the opportunity to live in the form of the transhumanist posthuman. In both cases, the reduction of the human to object-status fuels neoliberal profits and economic exploitation.

In closing, Wright is heavily invested in Afrofuturist practices and politics and her cyberfunk is deeply problematic, at least if we understand problematic as, to quote Carl Freedman, providing “critical traction to a conceptual framework within which further research and analysis can be conducted.” As I’ve gestured in this conference paper that will most certainly require later development, Wright’s cyberfunk engages with a conceptual framework that is our biopolitical age of epivitality, an age fostered out here in our quotidian reality saturated by the techno- and biological transformations we see currently taking place all around us. In focusing on those who are the exploited, the disenfranchised, the medically vulnerable, and so forth, Wright demonstrates in her cyberfunk fiction that in this age of epivitality our worth is increasingly shifting from the labour we exert in service of neoliberalism to the body we sacrifice to the neoliberal machinery. And, in drawing our attention to these fraught conditions, Wright’s cyberfunk stresses the importance of fighting to make sure there is more to living than simply as cogs in the biopolitical machine.

Notes

1. See Murphy's "Cyberpunk and Post-Cyberpunk" for a detailed overview of the movement.
2. See Schmeink's "Afterthoughts" for details.
3. For details about Moebius's influence upon cyberpunk, see Labarre.
4. See Tumino for an early exploration of cyber-capitalism.

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