

The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction

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Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

ISBN: 9780814214015, 212pp. £90.95 hardcover, £26.02 paperback.

This informative and well-written study of African American vampire fiction is the first book in Ohio State's new interdisciplinary series, *New Suns*, which features scholarship that explores race, gender and sexuality in speculative fiction. It belongs on the shelves of anyone interested in speculative fiction, the vampire, popular culture, African American studies, or American studies. In addition, Jenkins concludes his study of vampire fiction with a comprehensive bibliography that will send readers in multiple directions. The eleven-page bibliography provides everything a reader might want to know about vampires (including Matthew Beresford's *From Demons to Dracula: The Creation of the Modern Vampire Myth*, 2008), as well as about the culture that produced them: from studies of culture (Sikivu Hutchinson, *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels*, 2013), to classic works of sociology and history (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1965), to gender studies (Elijah G. Ward, 'Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and the US Black Church,' 2005). Surprisingly Jenkins does not mention Kendra Parker's study of black female vampires, *Black Female Vampires in African American Women's Novels, 1977 – 2011: She Bites Back* (2018) though his book may have gone to press before Parker's book was widely

available. While there are a few studies of individual writers of African American vampire fiction, Jenkins is correct to assert that ‘virtually all the scholarly work on African American vampire fiction focuses on Gomez’s *Gilda* or Butler’s *Fledgling*’ (7). Thus, his study fills a significant scholarly gap.

Jenkins begins his study by addressing an assumption commonly held by scholars and critics that ‘interests in vampires is a *white thing*’ (1). As someone already familiar with African American vampires created by Jewelle Gomez and Octavia Butler, I found the remark a bit of an overstatement, but was nonetheless happy to be introduced to a number of other African American vampires and, more important, to the ways these vampires emerge from and comment on the culture that produced them – a culture often dominated by the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality, as well as influenced by the Black Church. Jenkins articulates the overarching issues by which he organized his research: ‘Is there more to being black than having a black body, and what might the answers to that question mean for African Americans in the twenty-first century?’ (10). In a world that is openly global, multicultural, secular, and postcolonial, I would add that these issues also matter to people outside the African American community and outside the United States.

The study is carefully organized, each chapter devoted to a particular work (or sometimes series of works by a single writer) and to a particular aspect of the African American experience. Chapter One focuses on Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* and the way in which Gilda creates a queer family that allows its members to escape prescriptive ideas of race and gender to achieve a kind of freedom from the ‘Afrocentrism and multicultural conservatism’ that ‘competed for the hearts and minds of African Americans during the 1970s and ‘80s’ (25) and thus also a freedom from the idea of the vampire that reinforced ‘the racist, sexist, and homophobic understanding of

blackness' (32) that Afrocentrism had inherited from its colonial past. Chapter Two examines Tananarive Due's *My Soul to Keep*, calling attention to differences between Africa and the United States, as well as pointing out the damage done to African Americans by the Black Church. Included here is the church's reinforcement of male supremacy, its lack of tolerance for male homosexuality, and its failure to confront the underlying causes of racism. Brandon Massey's *Dark Corner* is the focus of Chapter Three, but so is the question of black masculinity. Jenkins examines the importance of Moynihan's controversial study of the African American family in which powerful matriarchs emasculated men. Massey thus explores dangers to the African American family and the African American community in the form of black males who threaten dominance over others in the same way they had been dominated by colonizers and slave masters. Chapter Four focuses on Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and the way Butler examines transhumanism, the belief that science can be appropriated to improve our species. Chapter Five's *Image of Emeralds and Chocolate* by Murray K. Johnson is the first black gay novel by an African American novelist. As such, it allows Jenkins to return to the psychological damage the Black Church has done to the LGBT community but also to straight women and to anyone who questions its absolute authority over the Black community. He concludes the chapter by zeroing in on self-awareness and self-acceptance: noting that a healthy African American community is built on 'black solidarity founded on real tolerance' (174). While the chapters, which are organized in chronological order, produce an overarching exploration of the African American vampire in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, individual chapters might be studied to understand specific authors.

Jenkins wraps up his discussion of African American vampires and blackness in a short conclusion that reinforces that blackness is multi-dimensional and that points readers to a greater

understanding of race and racism in the twenty-first century. The writers of African American vampire fiction all wrestle with the question of blackness but, more significantly, point to the fact that blackness was largely created by individuals and groups to justify slavery, colonialism, and other forms of inequality. Understanding the African American vampire is a way of seeing that these forms of power are socially constructed rather than natural, remnants of a racist past, which we can understand and ultimately overcome. As a reader, I wanted something a bit more tangible from Jenkins's conclusion even though that desire is asking a bit much of a critical study. Moreover, living in twenty-first century America, I recognize that we are as far from a post-racist society as we are from a post-sexist and post-classist one. Nonetheless, *The Paradox of Blackness* provides one way to explore that deeply flawed culture through the lens of speculative fiction.