Slavery and the Afrofuture in Samuel R. Delany

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Samuel R. Delany’s science fiction novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) takes Black bodies and lives as valid terms for imagining the future, and it resists “color-blind” or white-normative conditions for its vision of the politics and aesthetics to come. In the future, along with blue suns and winged dogs (Delany “About 5,720 Words” 7, 12) there will have been “worlds where being black mattered in different ways from the ways it matters now” (Delany qtd Peplow & Bravard 55).1 We readily identify this as an Afrofuturist text, in other words, using a term coined by Mark Dery nearly twenty years ago, but increasingly salient in academic, mass-mediated and social-mediated critical circles. The book works to make the future Black.

Yet Delany’s novel also requires us to rearticulate Afroturism’s historical grounds and procedures. Writing at a time when Delany, Charles Saunders and Octavia Butler were the only African Americans active in US commercially-published science fiction, Dery described their works as defiant, precarious projections of Black historical consciousness: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (180). Afrofuturism, in other words, is imagined as one more victory over the cultural genocide of enslavement. *Stars*, however, operates on different premises: its Afrofuture includes industrialized chattel slavery, but lacks organized resistance to slavery. Slavery and freedom are thus not successive, but simultaneous in this novel, and the free Black people therein confront the institution not in memory, education, or ideology, but as part of their own world. They meet an emancipated slave, Rat Korga, whose body and mind were abandoned by government and


plundered by capital, in order to create the wealth and ease of an apparently utopian galactic society.

Because it reinvents chattel slavery’s legal and material bases, Delany’s novel is not a “neo-slave narrative” (see Rushdy) like Beloved, Kindred, or The Known World. Rather, its first sixty pages, “Prologue: A World Apart,” constitute a “meta slave narrative” (Lavender 54–55), a defamiliarization of and abstraction from the historical record. Rat’s life story, from the moment his chattel status was realized up through his accidental emancipation some two decades later, is described by a third-person, omniscient narrator. Delany’s novel is thus less an exposition of Black historical trauma than an instance of how slavery can matter differently for Black people.

The present essay focuses primarily on the “Prologue,” particularly its careful revisions of what Saidiya Hartman has called “scenes of subjection,” the violent confrontations that define Black personhood in abolitionist-era Black literature. Rat’s story includes many similar tableaux of physical, emotional and sexual assault, but it pointedly excludes the embattled-yet-courageous, autobiographical selfhood that nineteenth-century writers expounded in and through such moments. He is not much like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs.

Instead, Rat Korga’s life story resembles other, critical and archival accounts of racialized, systemic bodily violence, including both the physical harm and duress experienced by nonwhite, poor, and criminalized people in the contemporary US, and an alternative, testimonial account of the Middle Passage. Hence, Stars presents chattel slavery as, neither a national event nor a philosophical challenge, but as existential reality: ever-possible and ever-present on those worlds—including our own world, today—where government institutionalizes class differences by marking the body itself, and capital appropriates such bodies in defiance of human rights, as fungible resources.
I close examining the aftermath of Rat’s emancipation, particularly his own, and others’, efforts to regulate his intimate and political relationships. These attempts to control Rat, though nonviolent, formally mirror his initial oppression, and comport with the expectations of powerful people and institutions in the big, plentiful, and apparently democratic post-slavery galactic post-nation he joins. Yet this pessimistic turn, too, reflects Delany’s dialogue with history. As Hartman wrote of nineteenth-century freedpeople, “[c]hattel becomes man through the ascension to the hallowed realm of the self-possessed” (123). After Emancipation one must own one’s self, and freedom blurs a bit at its edges.

1. “A World Apart” and the slave narrative tradition

The very first words in *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand* are reported dialogue: “‘Of course,’ they told him in all honesty, ‘you will be a slave’” (3). The novel’s involvement with slave narrative—or more precisely, with readers’ memories thereof and associations therewith—begins with this formal choice, since the word “slave,” coupled to the brief, anxious *frisson* of the second person, necessarily invokes New World Black chattel slavery (Lavender makes a similar point (55–57)). “You” who? *Me*? Though many other forms of forced labor and brutal dehumanization have existed and continue to exist, the Enlightenment’s realized nightmare remains salient in part because we remember it, following iconic authors like Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs, in psychologized, individualistic terms. “[T]he injustice and wickedness of slavery was always uppermost in my thoughts” (190), Douglass writes, his self almost fully occupied by rebellion. To many African American and US readers at least, any enslaved self, imagined for a vertiginous second or in grim, extended thought-experiment, locates herself in the antebellum US.
The reference deepens and intensifies via many details as Stars’ first scenes unfold. The “him/you” discussed and addressed as a future slave is the focal character, a young, able-bodied, cismale human. Without much in the way of social or political ties, he is quite comparable to many prisoners sold into the Triangle Trade during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The nudity, crowded cages, minimal caloric intake, beatings, filth and inhumane disregard (7, 8, 16–17, 29) visited upon him loudly echo barracoons and ship holds, while the sexual exploitation he experiences (15–16, 36) definitely resembles the domesticated assaults of the plantation house. Readers also witness, with him, mastery’s self-serving fantasies. One slave-driver, having forgotten to feed caged captives, voices an exculpatory folk-theory of the indestructible slave body, very like historical and contemporary racism’s account of inhuman Black strength: “It was an accident, man! Besides, I hear you can let ‘em go thirty, forty days without food, and they’ll still—” (7). Another, a woman who hijacks our young man from his ordinary labors out of an intense sexual fetish, desires him much as Leslie Fiedler describes Huck desiring Jim, “dreaming of acceptance at the breast [she] has most utterly offended” (Fiedler 671). “I mean, if you could only1… I mean, could you—If you might just put your arm around me, hold me—firmly, and perhaps even love me just a—love? Oh, what am I talking about! If you just didn’t hate me—” (Stars 21).

The “Prologue” re-teaches readers some of the primary lessons of African American literature, in other words—identification with the enslaved and disidentification with established power. Yet sometimes what’s missing shocks by its absence. There are no slave ships or kidnappers, no coffle or auction block in Stars. In fact, this man enslaved himself. He entered a contract willingly, because he believed it was reasonable and profitable to do so. He exists in a clearly neoliberal political order, in other words, wherein market forces are presumed to entail
optimal distributions of social and economic resources, and even those who stand to lose their very lives thereby share that presumption. His world is less like Olaudah Equiano’s Atlantic, crisscrossed by evangelicals and philosophe, and more like our own (more on this point below).

Readers do learn a great deal about what makes this a rational decision for the protagonist, and what makes him like the most disregarded and oppressed people in the US today. He is truly lumpen—learning-disabled, kinless, gay, institutionalized, even ring-wormed—but he heard one day that Radical Anxiety Termination, a brain operation, would “make me so I can understand things and numbers and reading and stuff!” (4). The RAT operation does improve cognition, but it also makes choice and self-reflection impossible, and on planet Rhyonon it renders people legally chattels for life. Since he was unable to achieve any significant quality of life without the capacity to participate in an information economy, however, the young man presented himself to the technicians voluntarily, demanding “All right, change me! Make me like you!” (ibid). He’s not unlike young Booker T. Washington walking over the mountains to Hampton, in other words, except that he’s signing up to be shaped and controlled, not psychologically or ideologically, but in his actual person. The procedure’s acronym, RAT, a dehumanizing slur applied to his whole class, replaces his personal name; throughout the rest of the novel, he is known to all as Rat, or Rat Korga, and he claims that designation himself, even after his emancipation.

In transporting chattel slavery from a colonial to a neoliberal context, Stars sets aside many formal and thematic conventions of slave narrative, particularly those deriving from an Enlightenment understanding of the self as philosophical subject and bearer of rights. Here is no internal drama of rebellion (originally a Christian conversion narrative; see Gould 14–16), nor any Enlightenment-rationalist emphasis on the absurdity of counting persons as property (17).
Unlike many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African American and African Diasporic autobiographers, Rat does not see his will or his desire as the wellspring of his humanity. He’s not much interested in his own mind, actually. This failure to interiorize the self is so far off-script that readers may not even notice it; the faceless vivisector within the story misses it completely when Rat comes to ask for the operation.

[Rat] said, “Will it—?”

“Destroy your will? Oh, we don’t do anything so simple or unsubtle. If you can make fine, fast and fertile decisions now, you’ll be able to make them afterward. You simply won’t be inclined to make new kinds of decisions, at least without instructions.”

He said, “Will it hurt…?”

“Say ‘yes.’ There’s no pain, I assure you—either physical or emotional. After all, what did you come here for?”

He said, “Well, yeah. Sure. That’s why I—”

“Say ‘yes.’ We need a voiceprint of the actual word: this is being recorded. Otherwise it isn’t legal.”

Which confused him. “‘Yes…’? Yeah, but that’s what I—” and felt something terrible in him pull away or something gigantic in him vanquished; and its departure or defeat was a relief or a release, which, because he had never felt anything before to such an extent seemed something that hadn’t, rather than something that had, happened: not an overwhelming occurrence to him so much as a total surround revealed—or removed. (5–6)

“Free will,” both as a concept and as a political principle, is a mere formality, of no use to Rat as he actually lives his life, and the story itself confirms his perspective. The very contract that
enslaves him is only an empty ritual: Rat verbally accedes three times, and twice reminds his interlocutor that he has already made his decision, before it takes effect. His apparent “choice” is of no moment, compared to the imperial power of the RAT Institute.

Interestingly, Rat’s disregard for will and selfhood also lead him to an alternative, visceral political analysis of the RAT operation and the enslavement it entails. To Rat, the narrator explains, the event was “not an overwhelming occurrence to him so much as a total surround revealed—or removed.” He lost not his immortal soul, but the world. Delany here replaces slave narrative’s conventional and public self-assertion with Rat’s incommunicable experience of isolation and social death (Patterson), and thus critiques the slave narrative tradition’s investment in autobiography. But he also, uncannily, reveals Rat’s future in our present. Those contractual terms—a piece of your very body in exchange for a mere simulacrum of human rights, because no one will ever offer you better—are no futuristic possibility; in limited but expanding circumstances, they are real now, in the legal arrangements neoliberalism forces on poor people, particularly nonwhites, in the US and around the world today.

2. Bodies for Sale, Present and Past

Body-compromising contracts like Rat’s aren’t particularly new, and they aren’t a secret. As African Americanist and legal scholar Patricia Williams has argued since the early 1990’s, US state policy and cultural consensus increasingly emphasize private contracts that ostensibly fulfill the caretaking responsibilities of government more cheaply—health care, utilities, protection from crime and fire, consumer protection, prisons, schools and so on—but practically require the disadvantaged to “agree” to lose bodily integrity and forego the protection of the state (Williams 34). Williams cites the example of a Black South Carolinian convicted of rape who signed documents requesting castration in lieu of a prison sentence (33). More recently Nancy
Scheper-Hughes, an anthropologist of Brazil, has documented domestic and international trades in poor people’s kidneys and other organs. Such body parts are given up for cash ostensibly with consent, but actually under terrible constraint, with some brokers and buyers in the US. Similarly Joshua Price, following both Angela Davis and the testimony of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, links the profitability of privatized prisons to the malign neglect and active abuse of prisoners, who are frequently disfigured or killed by profiteering denials of even routine medical care. In his title, *Prison and Social Death*, Price explicitly names these conditions as the return, or persistence, of chattel slavery’s technique.

Just like the RAT Institute, in other words, industry today plunders the very bodies of poor, criminalized and racialized people, via the government-enabled, ostensibly neutral formalism of private contracts, and in isolated or hard-to-observe contexts like prisons and grey or black markets (“worlds apart”). Delany’s re-formulation of slave narrative analyzes the present, by refocusing attention away from the dramas of subjectivity supposedly enacted by chattel slavery, and towards what actually happens to the racialized body. Turned onto the past, this same analytic turn—away from the will, and toward the body; away from publication, and toward testimony; away from the metropole, and toward the colony—also opens disregarded and under-thought archives of the African Diaspora to new understandings.

For there are other records of slavery besides the slave narrative tradition, and these include the testimonies of enslaved persons. The latter are few, and difficult, and partial, but they do exist. Rat’s story in several respects strongly resembles the words of a woman called ‘Sibell, a Barbadian “saltwater slave” (an enslaved person kidnapped from Africa, and not born in the New World), transcribed from conversation by a white Briton in 1799. Recently discussed by the historian Stephanie Smallwood (see Smallwood 203–6 for full text and commentary), the
archival document’s rationale is unknown; Smallwood hypothesizes that the transcriber, John Ford, may have been a visitor or tourist among the sugar plantations (202). I discuss ‘Sibell’s story for two paragraphs here, before returning to Rat Korga, on the assumption that both the content and the form of her words are unfamiliar to many readers today.

In a brief monologue of about 450 words, ‘Sibell tells of her African home (location unknown), her sale at the hands of treacherous kin, and her entry on board the slave ship. Throughout, she emphasizes ignorance, fear, liminality, and the erasure of family and national relationships by private contract:

..my Budder in Law sell me to de Back-erah people [White people]—me nebber see de White people before, me nebber see de great Ships pon de Water before, me nebber hear de Waves before which me frighten so much-ee dat me thought me would die.—My Budder in Law took up de Gun and de Powder which he sell me for and wanted to get ‘way from me, but me hold he and cry—and he stop wid me ‘till me hold Tongue and den he run way from me. (204)

She talks now; then, she fell fatefully silent. When she could no longer speak, or cry, or cling, her brother-in-law escaped her moral claim, and ‘Sibell became socially dead, a slave, her life sold for a loaded gun. His apparent vacillation, shame or guilt shows the ghost of other values accompanying Transatlantic slave markets; her testimony explains that what happened to her was contingent, not necessary. It did not have to be that way.

Notably, ‘Sibell did not bend her story to her audience’s curiosity. Some expected parts are missing—for example, we learn nothing of her arrival in the New World, or her life in Barbados—while others, such as the names of co-ethnic shipmates (“my Country woman Mimbo, my Country Man Dublin, my Country woman Sally”(204)), are clearly vital to her, but
only gravestones to us. The whole breaks off suddenly, as the transcriber notes that she “burst into tears and could say no more” (204). Smallwood argues that ‘Sibell’s words are
less about enduring the crisis of the slave ship than about surviving it. Indeed, what is
most striking about ‘Sibell’s story is its unambiguous message that the trauma of the
slave ship survivor lay in the effort of integration—the challenge to integrate pieces of a
narrative that do not fit neatly together, to suture the jagged edges and bleeding
boundaries of lives fragmented by captive migration. (205)
She doesn’t put her world back together in memory, as (for example) Equiano did in the first two
chapters of his narrative, which describe his childhood home and his Igbo people in great detail.
She tells us, instead, about the difficulty of living as a “saltwater slave,” someone whose world
remains broken. She is still trying to put it all back together, decades after the event: the memory
of going on board ship is still shattering to her.

‘Sibell, already “Old” in 1799 (202), likely did not live to see British Emancipation in
1834. Her life story was never published in her day, and the unique document seems to have
been preserved by little more than chance: Smallwood found it under “miscellaneous” at the
Bodleian (203). Rat Korga, by contrast, does leave slavery behind, and even has the mutilation of
his brain partially corrected, but Delany does not cast these events as episodes in a political
struggle or signs of historical change. Indeed, in Stars’ Afrofuture chattel slavery seems even
more monolithic than it was in 1799 Barbados, where ‘Sibell could perhaps have heard rumors of
the Haitian Revolution. The scarred, starved “rats” cannot rebel or even communicate with one
another, and the regime that creates and enslaves them is located on a backwater planet,
Rhyonon, culturally conservative and isolated from the galactic mainstream (“a world apart”).
Instead, Rat’s survival and emancipation are like the record of ‘Sibell’s testimony: a hugely improbable accident, whose very existence challenges the finality of our knowledge about slavery. Rhyonon was suddenly, completely destroyed one day, by causes unknown: perhaps local political strife, perhaps imperial genocide, perhaps a secret war between humans and shadowy, nonhuman aliens known only as “the xlv.” Fortuitously, just before the atmosphere burned off, Rat was sent to fetch something from a particularly deep sub-basement, and therefore lived long enough to be rescued by a galactic government survey team (*Stars 57*). For the remaining five-sixths of the novel, Rat is a living document to rescuers, caretakers, and onlookers: glamorous, at times almost an object of worship (see 305–311).

3. Self-Control and the Freed Slave

The transition between “Prologue: A World Apart” and the remaining five-sixths of *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is sharp. Readers move from third- to first-person narration, and from Rat’s grim, provincial subjection to the urbane, literally cosmopolitan life of Marq Dyeth, a Black human male, soon Rat’s lover and protector. Scarcity, despair and pain are replaced by *luxe, calme et volupté* (Baudelaire line 13), a cyorganic slave society by exuberant social creativity. Replete with underground anarchist cities (94–5), new genders (73), human-alien sex (226–7), a cruel galactic empress (116–117), inspired computers (107), mysterious castles (106), interstellar spaceships (334–5 *et passim*), cloning (117), telepathy and dragons (239–57), this lion’s share of the novel realizes virtually every trope for transcendence and transformation ever to appear on the cover of a pulp science-fiction paperback. Other Afrofutures seem meager in the face of such plenitude.

I recommend these joyfully strange chapters unreservedly, but the present essay remains with the “Prologue’s” unfinished business. Where can Rat fit in among these brave new worlds?
He too has been renovated, transformed; his body is healed, and even supplied with neurological prostheses that permit him to make choices, disagree with others, and reflect upon himself once more. But like the “saltwater slaves” Rat is also cut off from any origin, not only by the Rhyonon ecocide itself, but by his memories of the suffering that preceded it. As he himself puts it in conversation with the rescuers: “‘I had a world. But it is as true to say I never had a world. You have given me […] possibility of a world. What world will you give me?’” (164). Importantly, this request for “a world” is not a request for charity. Rat doesn’t think of himself as victimized by worldlessness, but as untethered, loosed, undisciplined:

‘What world will I have? You know: whatever you have given me, it does not correct the radical…’ Rat paused, tongue struggling with the syllables, missing as many as it caught: ‘radical anxiety termination. It only compensates. This is not like before […] So you see, now you must give me a world. Or I may take ten, or thirty, or a hundred. And then what would you do with me?’ (164)

He has initiative and desire now, but still no anxieties, no fears, and no relationships. This makes him dangerous, in his own estimation and that of others.

The devices that “compensate” for the RAT operation originally belonged to Vondramach Okk, tyrant of seventeen worlds (158), so there is some suggestion of haunting or possession here. Yet we can also read Rat’s words as a political and ideological truth: he threatens ideology as such, by so obviously existing beyond it. Hartman, discussing the “self-making” of postbellum African Americans, describes intellectuals’ and moralists’ efforts to police the conduct of four million freedpeople in similar terms:

Is not the free will of the individual measured precisely through the exercise of constraint and autonomy determined by the capacity to participate in relations of exchange that only
fetter and bind the subject? Does the esteemed will replace the barbaric whip or only act as its supplement? (124)

In other words, controlling yourself is both like and unlike the experience of external compulsion. To be recognized as free on an ongoing basis, Black people who survived chattel slavery had to submit to the established socioeconomic order, and therefore also to experience the distinction between slavery and freedom as contingent, maybe unreliable.

Government, majority-white do-gooders, and Black intellectuals, among others, offered the freedpeople Hartman studied “the exercise of constraint and autonomy” via education, respectability, and (illusory promises of) class mobility. Men and women were told to renovate their very selves, and to monitor their own behavior continually, in order to fully experience freedom. If anything, the “fetters” proffered Rat are more confusing, and more thoroughly vandalizing of sentimentality’s ethical pretension. The galactic government does indeed decide to “give” Rat a “world” (169), and in so doing they subject him once more to extraordinarily intimate constraints. Specifically, a cadre of functionaries decide to give him Marq Dyeth’s world—they hunt up Marq, explain that by their best computer models Marq is Rat’s “perfect erotic object,” and Rat Marq’s, “out to about seven decimal places” (170), and then drop Rat off at aristocratic Dyethshome. They give the survivor away, like a fairy-tale princess to the prince who guessed the riddle, in the hopes that an intense sexual relationship will obviate violent rebellion.

This love story, then, encloses and limits the danger that a man “never meant to survive” (Lorde) presents to the established order. Robert Reid-Pharr remarks on this peculiar twist of the plot:
Clearly the Spiders [government officials] hope or believe (and here I am not certain whether the confusion is mine, yours, or Delany’s, or something that slips tauntingly among the three of us) that the promise and danger indicated by Korga’s survival might be properly channeled by pairing him with an extremely competent student and practitioner of the narratological. (“Clean” 399; emphasis added)

Hope or belief? Absence or presence? Text or reader? Is the subjection of an ex-slave to our established socioeconomic order something we want to happen in a world to come, or something we observe in the world that exists? Interestingly, for Rat himself it is indeed a futuristic desire: he first asked for “a world,” and he first warns of his own potential for tyranny. His words are mediated, like those of Mary Shelley’s Creature and ‘Sibell, but we have no indication that they are unreliable. He wants to be “properly channeled.” Maybe we should not be surprised; after all, Rat was enslaved at his own hand, too.

In its pointed ideological and diegetic differences from slave narrative tradition, Delany’s novel offers a strong critique of our implicit reliance, even today, on relatively narrow African American literary conventions for making sense of Black history. Further, and more plangently, the text helps us to think about our present day in terms of chattel slavery’s partial, or intermittent, return under neoliberalism. Stars’ complex interweave of past and present also has, however, a more purely speculative political aspect. It requires us to think of the future as something we touch. As Delany has written elsewhere:

…if we believe that a relatively peaceful revolution is preferable to an armed one always to come, then we are—always—within the center, as we are always at the beginning, of that revolution now. (“Foreword” xii)
Only those who dream of violence, in other words, imagine that the revolution hasn’t come yet.

Those who know each day as the start of an Afrofuture—as the freedman Rat Korga does—necessarily disclaim vanguardism, dehumanization, dismemberment and death.
Notes

1. Delany himself strongly prefers lower-case “black” to designate African Diasporic people and culture. See “Midcentury” (220).

Works Cited


Contributor Bio

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