INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE, GENDER SUBVERSION AND RACIAL RESISTANCE IN RIVERS SOLOMON'S *AN UNKINDNESS OF GHOSTS*

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Abstract

This article examines how R. Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* challenges racial hierarchy, gender norms, and the ideologies that sustain the social order aboard the *Matilda*. Through a society organized around racial segregation, rigid gender classifications, and theocracy, the novel reveals how dominant discourses sustain systems of exclusion and oppression. Drawing on J. Derrida's theory of deconstruction and Afrofuturist perspectives, this study contends that *An Unkindness of Ghosts* turns the binaries on which this order depends against it. The novel does so through inclusive language, which unsettles gender categories and makes marginalized identities visible, and through Afrofuturism, which opens an alternative horizon beyond inherited hierarchies by centering Black intellectual agency.

Keywords: Inclusive language, race, gender, deconstruction, Afrofuturism.

Résumé

Cet article examine comment *An Unkindness of Ghosts* de R. Solomon remet en cause la hiérarchie raciale, les normes de genre et les idéologies qui soutiennent l'ordre social à bord du vaisseau spatial *Matilda*. A travers une société organisée autour de la ségrégation raciale, de classifications de genre rigides et de la théocratie, le roman révèle comment les discours dominants entretiennent des systèmes d'exclusion et d'oppression. En s'appuyant sur la déconstruction de J. Derrida et sur les perspectives afrofuturistes, cette étude soutient que *An Unkindness of Ghosts* retourne contre cet ordre les binarités sur lesquelles il repose. Le roman y parvient par le langage inclusif, qui déstabilise les catégories de genre et rend visibles les identités marginalisées, et par l'afrofuturisme, qui ouvre un horizon alternatif au-delà des hiérarchies héritées en mettant en avant l'agentivité intellectuelle des personnes noires.

Mots-clés : langage inclusif, race, genre, déconstruction, afrofuturisme.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive language has become an important issue in contemporary linguistic and cultural debates, particularly regarding the representation of identities marginalized by dominant language norms. As P. Johnson notes, gender-inclusive language "aim[s] to provide better linguistic representation for marginalized genders, including women and non-binary individuals" (Johnson 2024, p. 14). In literature, such language can challenge conventional categories of identity and question the relationship between language and power.

These issues are central to R. Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, a speculative novel set aboard the spaceship *Matilda*, where a rigid social hierarchy reproduces racial inequalities associated with American slavery and segregation. Black inhabitants, particularly those from the lower decks, endure forced labor, deprivation, and violence, while white elites maintain political and religious authority. Through Aster Gray and other marginalized characters such as Flick, Giselle, and Aint Melusine, among others, Solomon exposes the mechanisms whereby racial domination is maintained. The novel also challenges conventional gender classifications through the representation of non-binary identities and the use of the singular pronoun *they*. Beyond race and gender, it questions the ideological narratives used to legitimize authority and explores how scientific knowledge and technological ingenuity can contribute to resistance. This study therefore asks: how does *An Unkindness of Ghosts* challenge racial hierarchy, gender norms, and the ideologies that sustain the social order aboard the *Matilda*, and what roles do inclusive language and Afrofuturism play in this process?

The analysis draws primarily on J. Derrida's concept of deconstruction, which questions the binary oppositions and hierarchical structures underlying dominant systems of thought. For Derrida, such oppositions are never neutral, since "we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy" (Derrida 1981, p. 41). Deconstruction begins by overturning this hierarchy. A. Bradley further explains that "deconstruction is not a philosophical destruction or demolition but an affirmative process that seeks to reconstruct a given system or structure otherwise" (*Derrida's Of Grammatology* 2008, p. 46). This approach helps examine how racial classifications, gender norms, and dominant ideologies are constructed and contested in the novel. Yet deconstruction dismantles, and Afrofuturism imagines what comes next. For A. Zamalin, "Afrofuturism, with its emphasis on the not-yet (…) is, above all, fiction, and its fictions are meant to energize, inspire, and generate new analytical categories into being and disrupt the existing orders"("Afrofuturism as Reconstitution," 2022, p. 8). The two perspectives are thus complementary. The first exposes the

binaries that hold the *Matilda* together, and the second, by generating new categories and disrupting existing orders, opens a way beyond them.

This study contends that *An Unkindness of Ghosts* challenges racial domination, gender normativity and ideological control by turning the binaries on which the *Matilda* depends "against their presuppositions" (*Positions* 1981, p. 24). The novel does so through inclusive language, which unsettles gender categories, and through Afrofuturism, which opens alternatives to this order by centering Black intellectual agency.

The argument unfolds in three stages. It first examines how the spatial organization of power aboard the *Matilda* reproduces a racial hierarchy rooted in the logic of slavery. It then explores how rigid gender norms sustain the ship's social order and how inclusive language and non-binary identities challenge these norms. Finally, it considers how religious authority and the suppression of knowledge legitimize this order, while Aster's knowledge and return to Earth open up an Afrofuturist horizon beyond inherited hierarchies.

1- SPATIALIZING POWER AND REENACTING A RACIAL SLAVE ORDER ABOARD THE *MATILDA*

In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Rivers Solomon creates a dystopian universe in which the spaceship *Matilda* is portrayed as a closed micro-society that condenses the slave ship, the plantation, and the segregated nation, structured according to a rigid racial hierarchy that almost exactly mirrors the dynamics of antebellum slavery and racial segregation in the United States. Discussing the history of racial separation in the United States, J. H. Franklin notes that the segregationist principle that "the races should be kept apart, except where the whites were clearly in a superior role, was an important feature of most codes."(Franklin 1956, p. 3) Thus, under the guise of a story about humanity's survival, the novel reveals a social system based on domination, the classification of bodies, and the naturalization of inequalities, much like the system that existed in the United States in the past. This system rests on binary oppositions such as upper/lower decks and white/Black, in which the first term dominates the second, what Derrida calls "a violent hierarchy" (*Positions*, p. 41).

From the very beginning of the novel, the separation between the *Matildians* is immediately evident. It is specified from the outset that the Tarlanders, the race to which the main character Aster Gray belongs, are "the inhabitants of P, Q, R, S, and T decks" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 9). In fact, these decks are the lower decks, places where there is nothing but suffering and desolation. This is the area assigned to Black people, as Aster is described as a "dark-brown" person (R. Solomon 2017, p. 40), a description that also applies to the other members of the Tarlander community. The novel reveals a

community which is marginalized and oppressed, notably through language. Flick, a Tarlander, asserts that "guards be calling Tarlanders dogs all the time" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 9). All this shows how these individuals are dehumanized by the guards and, through them, by the ruling order, which regards them as subhuman.

The social organization aboard the *Matilda* is presented not as arbitrary but as a natural and necessary structure, where white supremacy is normalized, a system rooted in the logic of slavery, as A. Smith points out. She says that the first "pillar of white supremacy is the logic of slavery. (...) in this logic of white supremacy, blackness becomes equated with slavery" (Smith 2016, p. 67). This is why the supreme power aboard the ship is held by Sovereign Nicolaeus, who is white and resides in the upper decks. It is said that "Sovereign Nicolaeus is the Heavens' chosen ruler" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 9), which means that his power is limitless, granting him the right of life and death over the *Matildians*, particularly those from the lower decks.

In addition to the spatialization of power exerted on the *Matilda*, a system of slavery is also established aboard the ship, which functions as a floating plantation. The lowdeckers are forced to work on the plantations with overseers to control them, much like enslaved Black people in the United States. The following passage, which describes forced agricultural labor, is very explicit:

> "First group, it's time!" the guard escorting them shouted. He beat his baton against the wall, herding the fifty women assigned to cut sugarcane into a short, wide corridor. (...). "Second group, come on!" he barked. Aster hurried with her bunkmates into the corridor. (…). "Quick now, quick," said their overseer, ushering them into the field from atop his horse. They didn't need instruction to move hastily. (R. Solomon 2017, p. 59).

This passage, where the verbs "herding" and "barked" treat the women as livestock, emphasizes the constant pressure and physical exploitation to which the inhabitants of the lower decks are subjected. But this exploitation is not only physical. It is also, in fact, psychological. The inhabitants of the lower decks live in constant fear, under the ongoing threat of punishment, violence, deprivation of all kinds, and even death, recalling the disciplinary mechanisms typical of slavery regimes. For example, Giselle, concerned that Aster has not yet returned home, says to her, "it's almost curfew!" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 21). This illustrates that the inhabitants of the lower decks are not free to move about. As time passes and they are not yet home, they become anxious, knowing they are under the watchful eye of the guards, who regularly conduct headcounts to ensure that everyone is at their designated post or in their dormitory on time.

As for deprivation, the residents of the lower decks are consistently subjected to blackouts and deprived of necessities like heat and electricity, all under the pretext of conserving energy. Giselle, a

friend of Aster's with a revolutionary spirit, denounces this unequal social system that favors the whites in the upper decks while plunging the lower decks into darkness and extreme cold. She says, "cutting off heat to the lowdecks when there were woods, lakes, beaches, and game fields in the upper decks didn't make sense if the actual goal was conserving energy" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 23). Indeed, Giselle bitterly observes that the upperdeckers live in total comfort and even enjoy nature and heating, while those in the lower decks suffer, with their pain growing over time. Theo, the Surgeon of *Matilda*, another of Aster's friends and the Sovereign's nephew, reveals to Aster that his "Uncle's the one who instituted the lowdecks energy rations. (...). As Sovereign, he will have the power to inflict more suffering than that, and believe me, he wants to" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 35). The official pretext, energy conservation, thus masks the real function of the rationing, which is to keep the lowdeckers weak. The expression "poorly racial stock" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 36) evokes the vocabulary of breeding and turns a political choice into a biological fact, which is how hierarchy comes to look natural.

By reproducing the dynamics of slavery that took place in the United States within a futuristic context, Solomon emphasizes the persistence of racial domination systems and their ability to reinvent themselves in new forms. This persistence echoes Derrida's remark that such a hierarchy "always reestablishes itself" (1981, p. 42). Yet, racial classification is not the only mechanism through which identities are regulated aboard the *Matilda*. Gender also becomes a site of categorization and normative control. N. Mutton observes that "*An Unkindness of Ghosts* intersects non-binary identity with issues of race and class within the spaceship society." (2023, p. 23). The same logic of classification that ranks bodies by race ranks them by gender. The next section examines how Solomon challenges conventional gender categories through inclusive language and the representation of non-binary identities.

2- RETHINKING GENDER THROUGH INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND NON-BINARY IDENTITY

Within the universe of the *Matilda*, identity categories are not neutral, as they actively participate in the social organization of individuals. The rulers of this spaceship remain bound to heteronormative norms that recognize man and woman as the sole gender categories. The opposition man/woman works as Derrida describes it, not as a neutral pairing but as a hierarchy in which the masculine commands and the feminine is devalued. In the *Matilda*, this hierarchy is never debated but enforced.

An analysis of the social organization of the *Matilda* shows that neutral genders are unprivileged compared to traditional ones. The regulation of gender aboard the spaceship reveals that

the system of classification described in the previous section also operates through rigid gender norms.

Aint Melusine's experience illustrates the extent to which gendered expectations governed interpersonal relationships within the *Matilda*. Employed as the nanny of Theo Smith, also known as the Surgeon, Aint Melusine is remembered by him as someone who used to playfully throw him into the air while calling him "Birdy." Theo recalls that "my nanny would pick me up and fly me through the air as she called me (…) Birdy. For that, she got a slap from my father, who thought Birdy too feminine a nickname." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 79). The violence inflicted on Aint Melusine results from her transgression of the gender norms imposed by Theo's father. The nickname "Birdy", perceived as feminine, is considered inappropriate for a male child and therefore becomes a reason for punishment. The slap reveals what the hierarchy leaves unsaid, namely that masculinity is built by rejecting the feminine, so that a boy tenderly named like a girl threatens the boundary on which the father's authority rests. This episode illustrates how gender is socially regulated through everyday practices and linguistic choices aboard the *Matilda*.

Such regulation can be understood through J. Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix, according to which "sexes, genders and desires are maintained and naturalized under a binary heterosexual logic." (H. McCann and W. Monaghan 2020, p. 122). Within this framework, individuals are expected to embody identities that correspond to socially established relationships between biological sex, gender and desire. The reaction of Theo's father therefore reflects a system in which gender categories are treated as stable. Any behavior, appearance or linguistic designation perceived as incompatible with these categories can be sanctioned.

J. Butler's theory of gender performativity further challenges the idea that gender identity is an immutable essence. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that "identity is performatively constituted by very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (1990, p. 33). Gender is consequently produced through repeated social practices rather than simply expressing an already existing and stable identity. Butler further explains that gender is constituted "through a stylized repetition of acts." (1990, p. 191). This conception is particularly relevant to Solomon's novel, where gender categories are repeatedly shown to be imposed, negotiated and contested rather than naturally fixed.

The experience of the Tarlanders provides another illustration of this challenge to gender binarism. Although they are marginalized on racial grounds, Tarlanders are also stigmatized because their bodies do not conform to the gender categories recognized aboard the *Matilda*. Frederick Hauser describes them as people who "came from the Realm of Chaos" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 19) and whose "demon forms could not conform to the Holy Order set forth by the Heavens." (R. Solomon 2017, p.

19). He further explains that "Tarlanders bodies did not always present as clearly male and female." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 19). Their physical difference is therefore interpreted not simply as bodily variation but as a failure to conform to the normative order established by the dominant society. However, by representing bodies that cannot be clearly classified as male or female, Solomon exposes the limits of the binary gender system upon which the dominant order relies.

Against this rigid system of classification, Solomon introduces characters whose identities cannot be contained within conventional gender categories. This challenge is particularly visible in the use of inclusive language and, more specifically, in the use of the singular pronoun *they*. In English, *they* is normally a plural pronoun; used as a singular, it designates one person without assigning that person to "he" or "she". In other words, the singular *they* is used to designate non-binary characters. In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, this linguistic possibility becomes an important means through which Solomon represents identities that resist conventional gender classification.

Flick provides one of the clearest examples. When talking about Flick, the narrator initially hesitates over the appropriate pronoun to use, as in "'look how it blows up inside when I jostle it! Boom! Boom! Boom!' said Flick as she–he–no, *they*–shook the starjar." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 8). This sequence is particularly significant because it lets the reader see the moment when a binary label is assigned and then withdrawn, as the narrator's self-correction exposes the automatic habit of sorting people into "he" or "she". The narrator first attempts to place Flick within the familiar binary alternatives before rejecting both possibilities in favor of *they*. Far from being a grammatical correction, it dramatizes the inadequacy of binary pronouns to account for Flick's identity. The narrator refers to Flick through expressions such as "the way Flick pursed their lips." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 11), "Flick scrunched their brow, poked out their plump lips." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 11), and "Flick waited for their great-meema to return." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 12). Language becomes a means of acknowledging an identity that does not correspond to the binary structure of the dominant social order. The use of the singular '*they*' gives grammatical visibility to those who cannot be represented with conventional binary pronouns.

Solomon further complicates conventional understandings of gender through the practices of Q-deckers. The narrator explains that "all children are referred to with feminine pronouns" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 8), a default 'she' that assigns gender by convention rather than by identity, while later observing that Q-deckers "are assumed women unless there's a statement or obvious sign, such as fashions they wear or the trade they choose." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 86). These practices show that gender designation within the Q-deck community does not necessarily depend on fixed biological or

social categories. Instead, gender is negotiated through language, appearance, behavior and personal expression.

Aster's relationship with her own body illustrates this process of negotiating gender identity. She undergoes a "hysterectomy [and a] double-mastectomy" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 66). These surgeries involve removing her uterus and both of her breasts, which the *Matilda*'s binary reads as markers of womanhood. This decision deconstructs the body assigned to her and rebuilds it according to her own understanding of herself, which makes bodily self-determination, rather than biology, the ground of identity. Her reflection that she is "a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one very strange, flimsy indecisive body" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 308) explicitly resists the idea that identity must correspond to a single, coherent gender category. When she asks Theo whether her "body couldn't decide what it wanted to be", Theo says, "I think it doesn't matter because we get to decide what our bodies are or are not." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 308). The exchange places the individual's body at the center of gender identity and challenges the assumption that bodies must conform to predetermined categories.

Theo himself resists conventional gender expectation. He describes himself as "a queer" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 86), while Aster says he is "an anomaly of a man", "a gender-malcontent", and "an otherling." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 308). By choosing words outside 'man' and 'woman', Theo and Aster replace the ruling order's classification with their own vocabulary. Such terms resemble what Derrida calls undecidables, which inhabit an opposition "*without ever* constituting a third term" (1981, p. 43). Singular *they*, "an otherling", or Aster's "a boy and a girl and a witch" work less as a new category than as a way of disorganizing the man/woman pair from within.

In this respect, M. Sarikaya-Şen declares that *An Unkindness of Ghosts* "translates into a queer utopia that proposes and glorifies other forms of being beyond heterosexuality." (2025, p. 109). Solomon's representation of Flick, Aster, Theo and the Tarlanders gives concrete form to these 'other forms of being'. Through characterization and language, the novel questions the binary categories through which bodies and identities are classified. The use of inclusive language, particularly the singular *they*, is therefore not a merely stylistic choice. It becomes a means of granting linguistic visibility to marginalized identities. Derrida himself insists that overturning a hierarchy is not enough and that one must also reach "the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept'" (1981, p. 42). Afrofuturism can be read as the name of that emergence in the novel. The final section examines how the novel exposes the ideological narratives that sustain this order and how, once they are unsettled, Afrofuturism opens an alternative horizon beyond the established hierarchy.

3- BEYOND THE *MATILDA*: IDEOLOGICAL DECONSTRUCTION AND THE ALTERNATIVE HORIZON

The domination of lowdeckers aboard the *Matilda* is sustained not only through racial hierarchies and gender norms but also through deception. For three centuries, the spaceship's rulers have led its inhabitants to believe that they are traveling toward a utopian destination known as the Promised Land. Addressing lowdeckers, the authorities say, "*we must not let our sorrow impede* Matilda's journey forward to the Promised Land." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 100). This promise encourages submission by framing current suffering as a temporary condition that will eventually lead to salvation. The Promised Land thus becomes an instrument of ideological control, discouraging resistance by offering the oppressed prospect of future deliverance. The *Matilda*'s order is theological in Derrida's sense and rests on homogeneity, "the theological motif par excellence" (1981, p. 64), a single truth that tolerates no difference.

The *Matilda* social order consequently rests on beliefs presented as unquestionable truths. Its inhabitants are led to believe that the Earth has been destroyed and is no longer habitable, making their continued dependence on the spaceship appear inevitable. However, the revelation that the Earth remains alive challenges the official narrative and invites readers to question the other truths through which the ruling class legitimizes its authority. G. Castle explains that "deconstruction refers to a set of practices, common throughout the poststructuralist and postmodern fields, whose chief task is to seek out the contradiction, gap, errancy, play or aporia that defines and undermines 'the structuration of structure'" (2013, p. 160). Derrida belongs to this poststructuralist field. From this perspective, Solomon exposes the contradictions underlying the ideological foundations of the *Matilda*.

Religious discourse further reinforces this system of domination. The head of the *Matilda* regards "himself as second to God" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 193), thereby presenting political authority as divinely sanctioned. Religion also becomes a means of conditioning lowdeckers from childhood. Aint Melusine recalls the schooling offered to lowdeck children, which she describes in these words:

> [An] upperdeck woman who was a school teacher and had a mission to make all the little dark lowdeckers into readers. So they could memorize prayers. She'd tell [her] baby sisters that if they read and said their prayers and obeyed the Sovereignty, *Matilda*'s journey to the Heavens would be made pure. (R. Solomon 2017, p. 187)

The teaching associates salvation with submission and turns reading, usually a tool of emancipation, into a tool of obedience. It also discourages resistance by making each child responsible for the community's salvation, because any disobedience would taint the journey to the Heavens. Similarly, the rulers interpret blackouts and extreme cold in the lower decks as consequences of the lowdeckers'

sins rather than as technical failures. Their disobedience supposedly widens "The Gulf of Sin" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 149) and delays the journey to the Promised Land. By presenting material suffering as divine punishment, the ruling class shifts responsibility onto the oppressed and protects its authority from scrutiny.

Against this oppressive order, Solomon foregrounds the intellectual and technological abilities of marginalized characters. This emphasis can be examined through Afrofuturism, which K. Reynolds describes as "a creative genre, a methodology, and a philosophy that envisions just futures that are hospitable to Black lives" (2024, p. 236). Y. Womack further defines the genre as one that "combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic[al] realism with non-Western belief's" (2013, p. 9). In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, the speculative setting does more than provide a futuristic backdrop. It exposes the persistence of racial oppression while imagining Black characters as producers of knowledge and agents of change.

Aster embodies this alternative vision through her scientific expertise. She works as a doctor and surgeon, develops herbal remedies, and conducts research in her "botanarium" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 14). A surgeon must open a body before repairing it, which makes Aster's profession a figure of deconstruction, dismantling in order to rebuild. Her ingenuity also enables her to devise practical solutions to the danger faced by lowdeckers. When her friend Mabel struggles to breathe, Aster uses a "sink basin filled" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 55), "a box of powdered soda" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 55) and a "battery" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 55) to create a chemical process to generate oxygen and supply it to her. She also develops a stove out of "isopropyl alcohol" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 16) to help residents endure the extreme cold caused by the blackouts and restricted energy supplies. Similarly, the T-deckers create "starjars (…) their improvised lanterns" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 9) powered by "chemiluminescent reactions of peroxide, orange dye, and (…) phenyl oxalate ester." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 9). These inventions demonstrate that the lowdeckers possess technical knowledge and creative capacities despite the conditions imposed on them. As Reynolds observes, the novel presents the technologies developed in the lower decks as evidence of "a unique Black technoculture aboard *Matilda*" (2024, p. 239). While the rulers reproduce structures of enslavement, the marginalized inhabitants use knowledge and innovation to sustain their communities.

Aster's scientific abilities are also connected to her mother, Lune Grey, who worked as a mechanic on Baby, the source of energy that powers the spaceship. Lune investigated the *Matilda*'s hidden mechanisms and recorded what she discovered, including what the narrator calls "the entire history of *Matilda*'s flight" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 126). Like a mechanic who must dismantle an engine to repair it, Lune takes the ship's hidden mechanisms apart in order to understand and

eventually redirect them. Through this inheritance of knowledge, Solomon presents intellectual inquiry as a means of challenging official explanations and exposing concealed truths. Aster's determination to dismantle the ruling order is stated in her own words, "my commitment to the destruction of *Matilda*'s ruling order is well documented" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 25). Her friend Giselle similarly describes the spaceship as a "cursed fucking cage" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 122) and a "metal world of torture and despair." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 122). Their resistance is reinforced by the great-meema's assertion that "there is no Promised Land" (R. Solomon 2017, p. 18), which directly challenges the narrative used to secure the lowdeckers' obedience. By denying the Promised Land, the great-meema deconstructs the central belief of the ruling order and strips the promise of the authority on which obedience depends.

Aster's investigation eventually reveals that Lune had altered the spaceship's navigation system to redirect it toward the Earth. The narrator explains that "as *Matilda* approached the Great Lifehouse, she drew on energy from Baby to set brakes." (R. Solomon 2017, p. 235). The blackouts and cold are therefore not divine punishments for the lowdeckers' supposed sins; they are connected to the ship's technical operations and its journey toward the Earth. This revelation dismantles the religious explanation used by the rulers and exposes the gap between official doctrine and material reality. Knowledge thus becomes essential to challenging the ideological structures that sustain oppression. Aster's knowledge introduces heterogeneity into this closed system, thereby attacking the motif of homogeneity that Derrida says must be destroyed (1981, p. 64).

For Bernard Bell, neo-slave narratives are "modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom." (1987, p. 289). This is perceptible in Solomon's novel. By the end of the novel, an uprising against the *Matilda*'s authoritarian and theocratic regime results in the death of the new Sovereign and enables Aster to escape toward the Earth. Upon arriving, she discovers a flourishing landscape, which is highlighted by the narrator in the following lines:

> Certainly, these land before her were what the Sovereignty referred to as the Heavens, a perfect tangled mess of plant life so large, so big, so colossal, it equated one hundred *Matilda*s. She stepped out into the tall grasses, tawny shoots reaching up to her shoulder like stalks of amaranth. (R. Solomon 2017, p. 284)

This scene overturns the official claim that Earth is uninhabitable. The place described as the Heavens by the Sovereignty is not a distant, divinely promised destination but a living world that the ruling order had concealed from its inhabitants. A. Zamalin argues that "by undoing in fiction what is socially familiar and naturalized in practice and in history (…) Afrofuturism opens up a vantage for a utopian reconsideration of the (…) status quo." (2022, p. 8). In this light, Aster's return to Earth

does not offer a perfect or fully realized utopia; rather, it opens the possibility of rebuilding beyond the *Matilda*'s oppressive structures.

The novel's open ending is itself significant. It withholds any final resolution and thus avoids replacing one fixed order with another. Although the *Matilda* is also heading toward Earth, the collapse of its established authority leaves open the question of what kind of society will emerge. The return to Earth therefore represents more than an escape from oppression. It also raises the challenge of creating a different social order without reproducing the inequalities of the past. By combining the deconstruction of dominant ideologies with an Afrofuturist horizon of possibility, Solomon invites readers to imagine a future in which Black lives and knowledge are no longer subordinated to inherited hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of R. Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* has highlighted the persistence of historical injustices within a futuristic setting. Through the organization of life aboard the *Matilda*, Solomon recreates the logic of American slavery, where racial distinctions determine individuals' living conditions, social positions, and access to basic resources. The novel also draws attention to the constraints imposed by conventional gender expectations. Through the portrayal of non-binary characters and the use of the singular pronoun *they*, Solomon unsettles established assumptions about identity and demonstrates how linguistic choices can challenge the categories through which individuals are socially defined.

The novel's critical scope, however, extends beyond the regulation of race and gender. The ruling elite maintains its authority by manipulating religious beliefs and restricting access to the truth, while those relegated to the lower decks develop their own means of understanding and navigating their world. Aster's medical expertise, scientific experiments, and determination to uncover the *Matilda*'s hidden history illustrate the transformative potential of knowledge. From this perspective, the novel's Afrofuturist dimension allows Black characters to be envisioned as creators and innovators rather than merely as subjects of historical suffering.

Ultimately, Solomon's narrative suggests that the structures governing the *Matilda* are neither inevitable nor beyond challenge. In Derrida's terms, the novel turns the binaries on which the *Matilda* depends against its own order, and Afrofuturism imagines what comes next. By questioning imposed identities, exposing the foundations of political and religious authority, and foregrounding the resourcefulness of oppressed communities, the novel makes room for alternative ways of imagining collective life. Aster's return to the Earth renewed by vegetation gives this possibility a particularly

striking expression. Beyond the confines of the spaceship, another world becomes conceivable. The novel thus invites readers to consider not only how inherited systems of injustice endure, but also how knowledge, self-determination, and imaginative renewal may help bring their alternatives into view.

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