



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

Powering the Future: Energy Resources in Science Fiction and Fantasy

How to Cite: Diamanti, J 2019 Resource Radicalism and the Solar System of *Black Empire*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 56, pp. 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.96>

Published: 13 September 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

POWERING THE FUTURE: ENERGY RESOURCES IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

Resource Radicalism and the Solar System of *Black Empire*

Jeff Diamanti

University of Amsterdam, NL
diamanti.jeff@gmail.com

This article isolates an overlooked preoccupation in 1930s African American literature with America's emergent energy system and a literary history of power indispensable to understanding today's energy crisis as a social crisis. For George Schuyler, the physical power of a recently gridded America exposes the intractability of a racial politics from the inequalities accelerated in the nation's new energy infrastructure. Schuyler's *Black Empire* (1938 [1991]) contributes to the literary history of energy by turning the specifically aesthetic qualities of energy into a source of resource radicalism—what anthropologist Dominic Boyer calls 'energopower'—exposing the two sides of power and the narrative shape of an energy system to come.

Some weeks after George Schuyler concluded his two-year literary account of a Back to Africa campaign in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier* in 1938—a literary provocation in which a new Black Internationale turns the sun-soaked surface of Africa into its primary source of physical and political power—he offered a non-fictional coda in order to settle the score: ‘The three generations since Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation [...] have been the most momentous in the history of the world’ (1991: 328), he began, yet Blacks from a global perspective looked none the better in the 1930s. In the 73 years between 1865 and 1938, he continued, ‘colored people’ had seen their legal freedom instituted across America, while they simultaneously watched the symbolic geography of their racial origins subsumed under the colonial economies of the ‘White Internationale’. While ‘the fortunes of the darker races’ were up against the ropes as early as ‘the 15th century’ (Schuyler, 1991: 329), this most developed phase of colonial conquest was fueled not merely on military or physical domination. What Schuyler will first call the energy structure of ‘the new world economy’ plays a crucial but severely neglected role in what he later terms ‘the new power economy’. Lightning speed modernization in the West, Schuyler observed, owed its source not merely to cheap or free labor (though Schuyler was no stranger to the demographics of capital and labor) but to a racial monopoly over the new energy resources responsible for rapid economic and political expansion. If his serial novel initiated two years earlier sourced solar power for its literary future of a Black Empire—named ‘The Black Internationale’ and ‘Black Empire’ in the newspaper, but herewith called *Black Empire* as its novelization would later have it—its coda would set the energy structure of the ‘new power economy’ in the political history of race; or rather—and this is why I am calling it a coda instead of an appendix—‘the international color line’, once the supply chain for the ‘new power economy’ is up and running, is cartographically identical to the infrastructure of that new energy economy Schuyler spent two years dramatizing.

From where Schuyler sat in late Depression-era America, it was all too clear that the new energy system built around coal and oil constituted both the physical and political power of ‘the new world economy’ from which the US (or a specific version of the US) would emerge triumphant. Though the vast majority of US citizens would

reap no material benefit from wealth accumulating in the energy sector, Roosevelt's New Deal for America made visible the infrastructural future of the nation, and the racial lines it would cement. Virtually overnight, explosive growth in public utilities companies coupled with a national electricity grid changed the political, physical, and energy structure of America (Huber, 2018). Not only would American Blacks play little part in the ownership of the energy revolution sweeping the nation, they would have little part to play in business ownership as such.

It would thus come across as more than odd to those familiar with Schuyler's polemics against Harlem Renaissance champions Alain Locke and Langston Hughes when he turns a complete 180° in the final part of his coda and observes the revolutionary potential of the 'new negro', a nominalization famously popularized by his opponent's poetry anthology on *The New Negro* (1925). Aware that 'both the 2nd and 3rd Internationales abandon[ed] the colored peoples to the mercies of their masters' (1991: 336), the 'new negro' can now confidently build, Schuyler insists, a 'Black Internationale' cleansed of the worker movement's racial contradictions. In the new economy, Schuyler saw the seeds of a new power source capable of turning Blacks into the 'Damoclean sword dangling over the white world', for 'he is on the march, he cannot be stopped, and he knows it' (1991: 336). The physical materialism fueling the most advanced stages of what he calls the 'White Internationale'—Western capitalism at its most industrial heights—thus lays the foundation for materialist concept of race rid of what Schuyler saw as Alain Locke and Langston Hughes' racial idealism, even if its hyperbole coded Schuyler's new position in satire.

This is almost universally opposed to the legacy with which Schuyler has come to be associated (Leak, 2011; Veselá, 2011: 271). In short, he has since those debates been read as the ultra-conservative wing of the otherwise progressive 'new negro' movement, even if his more widely read and critically acclaimed *Black No More* (1931) imagined a biotechnical solution to segregation that would occur to more recent critics as a prescient critique of capital's necessary dependence on racial distinction (Retman, 2008). But all along, it was the liberal frame of Black progressivism that troubled Schuyler and eventually forced him to the right, since it was (for him) on a cultural essentialist concept of race that the 'new negro' movement was built.

Compare Schuyler's racial materialism with his non-fictional rebuttal to Locke in 'The Negro Art Hokum' from a decade earlier, for instance, where what's most pressing is not the isolation of Black content in Black art (an essentialism central to Locke's 'new negro') but an aesthetic politics blind to color: 'Aside from his color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink', Schuyler argued, 'your American Negro is just plain American' (1926: 662–3). Between these two opposing views held by Schuyler—that racial essentialism runs counter to racial emancipation, and that 'the new negro' is on the threshold of its revolutionary potential—is *Black Empire*, the geopolitical logic of which will help explain why Schuyler offers energy as both the problem and solution of 20th century race. The entangled logic of race and energy infrastructure, coordinated as they are by the energopolitics of capital, unfold in the novel as a *resource radicalism*—consistent, I will maintain, with the *political* conservatism with which he later gets associated, but not conservative at all from the standpoint of today's debates about energy transition—into the energy novel he helped introduce.

If reading for a cultural politics of energy helps run *Black Empire* at an angle to the cultural politics of race that have until now dominated Schuyler's critical treatment, an important contradiction nevertheless remains by the end of the novel's provocation. At scale, the novel imagines a Back to Africa campaign fueled by a series of novel technologies for which solar energy provides the all-important out from the confines of a mode of production and system of power bound to white capitalists (Tal, 2002: 65). In this way, *Black Empire* takes the form of a science fictional anticipation of a world tilted toward the African continent, instead of a Euro-American axis fueled by coal and oil. In so doing, the novel also gestures toward at least two examples of solar power fueling both an anticolonial imaginary in Africa, and the thwarting of that imaginary, in the examples of Frank Shuman and Augustin Mouchot, whose 19th and early 20th-century solar technologies will occupy the middle part of this article. If *Black Empire's* Africa and its solar potential reverses the racial coincidence with energy infrastructure in America—effectively writing a neo-native origin myth into the continent's energyscape—then those Blacks left in the US become conceptually difficult to place after Africa has become the reclaimed territory for the Black Internationale. By the end of the novel, more than one character will wonder what

would it mean to be Black in the US when Africa, or more specifically the unlimited power soaking its surface, has provided the means for redefining the relationship between infrastructure and race? Race gets reimagined as not just a socio-historical construction in *Black Empire*, but as both a cause and effect of an energetic inflection to state power that surges through the new African state (in the future tense) and the US (exposed *post festum*).

While my focus here is on offering a reading of *Black Empire's* contribution to the cultural analysis of energy, resources and their infrastructures continue to preoccupy the literary history of race in modern fiction and modernism more generally. Kate Marshall's (2013) work on the corridors and infrastructures of modernism help draw out the aesthetic work of these contiguous spaces for modernism's emergent media theory of the literary itself, while Michael Szalay's (2000) formative account of power's two faces amidst the post-Depression phase of American modernism, when structural inequality became the means of modernist cultural production, offers a framework for drawing out the cultural economy of the US's rapid infrastructural expansion in the interwar period. Certainly the relationship between coal power and racial inequality marks Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1944), and more profoundly Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Energetic power—or what Dominic Boyer calls 'energopower'—thus names the technologies and logics by which forms of exploitation reinforce forms of domination, and vice versa.¹ In *Black Empire*, however, racial and energy inequality

¹ The concept 'energopower' was originally coined by Dominic Boyer in his introduction to a special issue of *Anthropology Quarterly* (2014). Boyer explains that the essence of the variation on Foucault's 'biopower' is that energy offers:

an alternative genealogy of modern power, as an analytic method that looks in the walls to find the wiring and ducts and insulation, that listens to the streets to hear the murmur of pipes and sewage, that regards discourse on energy security today as not simply about the management of population (e.g., 'biosecurity') but also about the concern that our precious and invisible conduits of fuel and force stay brimming and humming. *Above all, energopower is a genealogy of modern power that rethinks political power through the twin analytics of electricity and fuel* (2014: 325 italics in original).

Boyer's *Energopolitics* is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

tell not heterogeneous histories but rather the historical dialectic of power during 20th-century modernization as it starts to trouble the political ecology of race at the cusp of 'the new power economy'. The energopower that entangles capital and the unfolding relations of race and class can only ever fictionally be isolated from political and cultural forms of power. *Black Empire* turns this entanglement into the centre of its gravity and in so doing imagines a world where energopolitics is an opportunity for, rather than a restraint on, Blackness, even if the planetary axis of race gets reoriented in the meantime.

Resource Radicalism and the Solar State

Mine is not the first account of Schuyler's novel to highlight its technological inventiveness or its prophetic anticipation of no fewer than five advances in medicine, agriculture, renewable energy, telecommunications, and bio-warfare. Indeed of the little scholarship that has taken *Black Empire* seriously—a gap in part explained by the novel only appearing in novel form in 1991, but also because Schuyler's earlier *Black No More* has been consistently read as the climax of his literary career—its anticipation of key 20th-century technologies is what has licensed critical engagement.² Without exception, however, the curious case of *Black Empire*'s technofuturism has motivated at least three commentators to confirm Schuyler's conservative views on what in the 1930s was a groundswell in internationalist politics amongst American Blacks. Alexander Bain's (2007: 939) contribution reads the technological medium of the novel's fascist irony as Schuyler's veiled argument 'that any collective politics of difference is a structure not of liberation but of delusion'. Perceiving the same posture towards Black internationalism in the 30s, Henry Louis Gates delivered the nail in Schuyler's literary coffin when he called its politics 'schizophrenic' (Gruesser 2000: 106), by which he meant (and this would become a trope of Schuyler criticism) that Schuyler was Black in skin only. What makes the political force of the novel's technofascism so effective in the narrative is its recognition that the Black

² This scholarship includes Pavla (2011) and the remarkable historicization of what Tal (2011) calls 'Black Militant Near-Future Fiction'. In the latter's account, Schuyler's second novel, for all its conservative undertones and indictment of the 'natural' elements of a racial internationalism, is the most hostile to fantasy fiction since its 'hard science' is both the subject and object of the novel.

Internationale is pre-existed by a White Internationale, and—more to my interest here—the former will remain satirical so long as the physical power of the latter remains inoculated from critique.

Thus, when the novel's narrator, Carl Slater, eventually decides to leave his journalism career to join the Black Internationale's (B.I.) Harlem mastermind, Dr. Belsidus, it is not merely because Belsidus is 'something else', which is to say an icon and megalomaniac, but because the B.I.'s capacity to retool decidedly white materials is enormously disorienting. At first, Slater is as skeptical and appalled as many later critics of the novel. But then he is let in on a secret. Slater joins upon receiving a tour of the organization's economic and technological sources, since only then does the project of a Black Empire become probable. Mr. Fortune, the B.I.'s resident mechanical engineer, realigns the 'amusement' with which Slater initially responds to the B.I.—his attitude at first is that Belsidus' plan to out maneuver 'white civilization' was somewhere between 'mad' and 'Garveyistic' (Schuyler, 1991: 10)—and he does so by revealing the furnace that renders jewelry stolen from rich whites into 'an entirely different shape and form' (Schuyler, 1991: 18). A crew of '40 young Negros' (Schuyler, 1991: 18), we quickly learn, steals goods from rich whites uptown in order to optimize the commodity form of value in Harlem. Rather than simply pawn the goods at the discount rate of the black market, Mr. Fortune puts them back into the white market, saturated with black labor both physical and intellectual. Discovering the true nature of the commodity form—that its exchange value is not shackled to its use value, but rather the social relations its shape expresses—the B.I. is able to invent a market share in luxury goods, in turn funding its more fundamental economic monopoly: the energy economy.

Their discovery that economic value is indexed to a racialized market map also explains why the novel devotes so much attention in its early pages to establishing Belsidus' racial ambiguity, for while his complexion is recognizably black, nothing else is. His 'austere and respectable' mansion in the 'Seventies between Park and Madison Avenues' Negros' (Schuyler, 1991: 18) puts him not just outside of Harlem, but at the centre of the rich whites his organization seeks to supplant. More than his property, his 'perfect white teeth contrasted sharply with his smooth, almost black

skin' and 'his voice were cultured' (Schuyler, 1991: 3). He is, in short, 'someone of consequence' (Schuyler, 1991: 3), which in Slater's Harlem means not of Harlem.

When Slater admits his first impression of the B.I. is that it is 'rather Garveyistic', he learns very quickly why he's wrong. Though Belsidus' scheme looks consistent with what in the 30s was already a long history of Back to Africa initiatives—it in fact begins not with Marcus Garvey but rather the resettlement of Liberia with freed slaves from America in the 1820s—its ambition and claim on the 'shape and form' of power at stake in racial colonization distinguishes it from Garvey's in at least two respects. The first is that the B.I.'s understanding of the political economy of power is that Blacks could never expect a different shake in the world without stripping whites of theirs. Belsidus recognizes, in other words, that power is not pluralistic. Taking Africa back in order to establish a state formally equal in the abstract to all states would merely reproduce power relations of race internal to the US, except at the global stage. Instead, Belsidus' 'ideal and objective is [...] to cast down the Caucasians and elevate the colored people in their places' (Schuyler, 1991: 10). Recognizing that 'white people got all the power, all the industry, all the money', Belsidus' 'ideal and objective' is not merely to compete with whites, but (in an economic sense) to become them (Schuyler, 1991: 10).

More than his nearly white appearance, real estate, and disposition, Belsidus' idea for the B.I. is to outmaneuver whites in the economic sphere in order to strip them of their power in the political sphere. This means cutting them off from their physical power, their monopoly on energy and its infrastructure, in order to flood the market with black power. For Slater, it all sinks in once international delegates gather for the first convention of the B.I., whereupon Belsidus reveals the organization's silver bullet. 'Unity' he explains to the delegation, is historically elusive because anticolonial forces never understood 'how to properly organize and exploit [their] own resources' (Schuyler, 1991: 34). For the B.I., however, radicalizing resources literally means actualizing the enormous energy *in potentia* pouring into the African continent. When Slater gets a chance to meet the B.I.'s head chemist, Sam, he learns their power play will be fueled not by fossil fuels but the sun.

The B.I.'s massive fortune, amassed through the luxury goods market it turns out, was only a means towards investing in the technological infrastructure of the B.I.'s future victory. The first is the invention of hydroponic agriculture, a process in which high quality fruits and vegetables are grown underwater supplied 'with liquid chemical food, the same elements vegetables extract from the soil' and 'sunshine' through a transparent greenhouse dome (Schuyler 1991: 49). Sam, the in-house chemical engineer, explains the technical and economic significance of chemical fertilizers:

There is no plant disease, no poor distribution of food elements, no excess or lack of light. Our plants grow quickly and the quality of the vegetables is better. Our tomato plants grow fifteen to twenty-five feet tall, and others in proportion. Soil culture produces about twelve tons of vegetables an acre. Our yield is 200 tons an acre. Each pool will produce 400 tons of produce, and it is ready for market long before products raised in the soil [...] White folks can't equal that... We'll take all the quality trade, not only for strawberries but everything else (Schuyler, 1991: 49).

Through advanced scientific management of the most important commodity sector in the economy, the B.I. is about to 'knock 'em dead' and 'put the farmers out of business' (Schuyler, 1991: 48). Not only does Sam discover productivity gains years ahead of his white competitors, he does so at dramatically reduced cost. It is virtually cost free because the B.I. has invented a revenue-neutral means for generating the second most important commodity for the modern economy: energy.

Slater intuits the problem of energy costs in the current landscape, and thus logically asks 'isn't your overhead enormous?' and 'It must cost a tremendous amount of money to steam-heat a mile of water two feet deep. Where is your powerhouse?' (Schuyler, 1991: 49–50). But of course 'power' in Schuyler's novel has meant not one but two things all along, and so Sam's surprising answer carries weighted meaning given the economic implications of what we have just learned: 'neither our steam or electric power', Sam explains, 'costs us a cent. Tomorrow I'm going to show you a

source of power, hitherto practically neglected, that is inexhaustible. Negro brains [...] have harnessed it and put it to work to serve our ends' (Schuyler, 1991: 50). The source of power is, of course, an enormous solar engine, and the powerhouse that contains it puts the B.I. on track to redraw the historical cartography of power. And in the meantime, *Black Empire* will slip a radical theory of the infrastructure of race through the back door. What it will have meant to be white all along will have something to do with the political economy of energy, and virtually nothing to do with skin.

Perpetual Motion and Perpetual War

Neither Sam nor Slater are blind to the geopolitical or world historical significance of energy, or more specifically cost-free energy, which is why the novel is able to swiftly move from a first-person detective novel to one that anticipates the dramatic scale of a world war—imminent in 1936—to anyone paying attention—once the B.I.'s energy core is explained. Hence a techno-delirium, or a kind of geoconsciousness, bookends Sam's explanation of the solar farm's technical specifications: the 'sun engine' as Sam calls it, costing only \$100 but lasting 'indefinitely' is 'probably the most revolutionary invention in the past thousand years' (Schuyler, 1991: 53). What makes it revolutionary, in addition to its incredible Energy Return on Energy Invested (EROEI)—approaching the autogenetic 1:0 so motivating to the scientific imaginary driving the study of energy centuries before—is that the solar engine is uniquely tailored to the B.I.'s geographical ambitions:

This engine is capable of converting the sunlight falling on an area of one square mile into 70,000 horsepower on a cloudless day. Imagine what that will mean when we set up these batteries in the tropics? Why, the sunshine falling on the State of New Mexico alone furnishes a hundred times as much energy per year as the total of all coal, oil and water power used per year in the United States (Schuyler, 1991: 54).

Implicit in Sam's thought experiment—'imagine what that will mean'—is the solar engine's redefinition of geopower, where the significance of setting in the coming war between Black and White Internationale's, or more specifically the power of

Africa, is literalized. Africa's massive surface area and its global share of the equator means that it is poised to become a global leader in an energy economy indexed to solar power. Thus, while the B.I. shares a lineage with previous Back to Africa efforts, its historical significance is made incidental.

Hence, after seeing this demonstration, Slater finds himself in 'a dream, like traveling in some strange world' (Schuyler, 1991: 55). For what the B.I.'s energy strategy has effectively done to the 'world' is redefine its material setting in relation to a radically new future perfect progressive tense of race, made possible by equatorial advantage. Sub-Saharan Africa, historically synonymous with the most extreme form of economic poverty within the global dynamics of industrial capitalism, is rendered into the future *centre* of political and physical power due to its geographical setting in the *solar system* actualized by the B.I.. 'Some strange world' indeed, one whose political axis shares an identity with its celestial one.

Black Empire's invention of a 'strange world' molded by a solar system of energy in Africa is not just logically justified in foregrounding the political irony of African hegemony, but is also consistent with at least two notable solar enterprises in the living memory of those reading the novel immediately upon publication. Fresh in the scientific imaginary of Schuyler's America would have been Frank Shuman's solar hot boxes, installed in Egypt in the years leading up to World War I. Profiled in a 1911 issue of *Scientific American* and in *Nature* the following year, Shuman and the British-backed Sun Power Company became science celebrities due to their sun-powered irrigation system installed on the banks of the Nile. War and swift advances in coal and petroleum technologies would prove fatal to Shuman's promise of a solar aversion to fossil fuel 'barbarism' (Shuman, quoted in Kyrza: 2003: 25). Instead of a solar modernity, we would have come to have a petromodernity.

Shuman's is the second example that has become famous again since the specter of peak oil restored scientific and business investments in renewable energy (Schneider-Mayerson, 2013; Canavan, 2018). Champions of renewables often cite French inventor Augustin Mouchot's 19th century efforts in Europe and North Africa in their mythology of alternative energies. Funded by Napoleon III's treasury, Mouchot expanded on his early experiments to convert solar energy into

steam for cooking by building in 1867 what was then the largest solar steam engine (Gordon, 2001). Mouchot offered a demonstration to the emperor, which, along with the publication of his book *La Chaleur Solaire et ses Applications Industrielles* (*Solar Heat and its Industrial Applications*), reportedly won immediate favor given France's reliance on energy imports. Though the steam engine encouraged the emperor to boost funding for Mouchot's future research into renewables, the book is today the only remaining evidence of the machine due its destruction during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.

Not only was Mouchot's prototype turned to ash during the Prussian occupation of Paris in 1871; so, too, were France's hopes of sustaining a steady coal supply from the contested territory in Alsace-Lorraine, since its resource rich hills were the first to change hands during the war. No small loss, considering France's dependence then (as today) on energy imports, most notably from Britain and its coal reserves. Hence Mouchot's earlier warning about the economic and political necessity of solar power proved all too true:

One cannot help coming to the conclusion that it would be prudent and wise not to fall asleep regarding this quasi-security. Eventually industry will no longer find in Europe the resources to satisfy its prodigious expansion [...] Coal will undoubtedly be used up. And what will industry do then? (Kyrza, 2003: 152)

The Prussians' deficit in colonial resources abroad meant France's energy lifeline in the North would 'be used up' some three years later.

More ironic than the double loss to the Prussians—of both solar and coal security—was the other major discovery exhibited at the 1867 Universal Exposition: petroleum. For the first time, the unimaginable range of products available from petroleum was made public; the Americans were the most prudent marketers of its future. Certainly, earlier uses for oil predate the Exposition by decades, and, by some accounts, centuries. The major deposit discovered at Oil Creek near Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859, however, launched the early stages not just of fuel oil but the petroleum industry that would half a century later remake the physical and

social shape of the globe. At the Universal Exposition, no fewer than seven consortia exhibited petroleum products from the US in the Chemical and Pharmaceutical Products section alone (Blake, 1871: 242–4).

Mouchot's solar future, in other words, was in direct competition not only with Prussian energy aggression, but also with the birth of the oil sector. And yet, Mouchot's bad timing in Paris is also what led him to Africa the next decade. Mouchot would once again exhibit a solar machine in Paris, in 1878, but only after developing a more efficient prototype in the sun-soaked continent. Recognizing that solar intensity and duration would prove as important to mechanical output as the reduction of heat loss in his engine, Mouchot moved his laboratory to the newly-established French colony of Algeria.

In the 1870s, French Algeria was rapidly becoming as French as it was Algerian. The newly established Third Republic made the acquisition of property both affordable and streamlined for French citizens willing to resettle the colony. As solar historian Frank T. Kryza puts it, 'the combination of constant sunshine and cheap land convinced Mouchot that solar power would be commercially successful in the French colonies' (2003: 165). Mouchot's insight into the solar potential of Africa had as much to do with its physical geography as it did with its economic geography: only with cheap land does the sun that hits it promise economic surplus. No small wonder, then, that his decision to exploit both proved beneficial not to the colonized population then suffering under the weight of a resource-thirsty French state, but the colonizers and their resident army. Mouchot's most notable and lasting invention, in short, was a portable solar oven able to feed the French army without costly fossil fuels.

Mouchot would very quickly recognize the obverse effect his invention was having on the local population and the *pieds noirs* (poor white migrants from Europe) who 'lived and died without either memory or hope, happy for the crusts that kept them alive or the sleep that brought them the brief, uneasy solace of dreams' (Mouchot, quoted in Kryza, 2003: 169). The promise of cost-free energy, optimized in Algeria because of its fortuitous geography, was never going to turn the tide of those social relations necessary for a successful colonial enterprise. Unlike the fantasy in Schuyler's *Black Empire*, the empire that would profit from cost-free energy was the

one with the biggest army and the largest property portfolio. Even though Algeria proved ideal for the technical side of solar power, Mouchot could no longer stomach the historical reality of power in the colonial landscape and requested a return ticket home to Paris. Angered by the threat of a squandered investment, French authorities refused, insisting instead on a bigger and better solar machine worthy of the 1878 Universal Exhibition. Mouchot would successfully improve his original 1867 design—in Paris his new machine would run at a pressure of 91 pounds and be able to make ice, and by 1880 would also have printing capability, as demonstrated when it published 500 copies of the *Journal Soleil*—but the lesson about physical and political power in Algeria was instructive.

Today, when the German consortium Desertec scrambles for desert property and solar energy in North Africa backed by a 9-billion-euro investment from Siemens and Deutsche Bank, Africa is once again poised to satisfy the energy needs of European capitalism. In a tragic twist to history, however, Africa's most prized possession—its surface area—is set not to solve the problem of its uneven development, but to instead facilitate it further. Desertec is one of a number of ventures seeking large-scale infrastructure opportunities for renewable industries in Africa, along with Chinese, Brazilian, and Indian firms whose collective investments account for over 83 million hectares of land (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2015). Most of this activity amongst the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) is meant to address food shortages that have persisted since the 2007 food crisis, but foreign investment in Africa is increasingly directed at natural resources like water and energy in a bid to avoid future energy crises. At bargain prices and with fertile conditions in places like Ethiopia where much of this capital has been directed, a wide range of resources can be shipped back to production centres for manufacturing. And since the energy increasingly extracted from African soil is routed first through foreign infrastructures—Desertec will lay a 4,000km direct current pipeline under North Africa and the Adriatic Sea, linking the two continents (Clery, 2010: 792–3)—Africans will once again become consumers, rather than owners, of commodities that originate in Africa. Renewable or not, energy under capitalism will further intensify the separation of workers and consumers from the means of their

own reproduction, and the vast quantities of profits available from energy as low cost as solar will accumulate in the centres of the postindustrial economy.

This is precisely the narrative tendency of energopower that Schuyler's literary experiment anticipated at the cusp of national liberation in 1930s Africa. It would do so by rewriting the color scheme of colonialism right at the cusp of its historical breakdown, imagining a world where African Blacks trained in America used the physical power of energy to turn the tides of political history. Anyone reading Schuyler's book in its original serial form would also have been reading about the Italian-Ethiopian War in the paper's news section. For from 1935–36, Mussolini's fascist state made what would be its last foray into the colonial market, and Ethiopia—famously the only African nation never to live under colonial rule—would come symbolically close to its neighbors' political fate (Taketani, 2010).

It is no accident then that the B.I.'s first conquest in Africa, after taking out the colonial government of Sierra Leone, is Liberia. In each remained the residue of previous attempts to resettle Africa with freed black slaves: the British in Sierra Leone and the Americans in Liberia. Historically, Liberia was the first and only result of American colonialism on the continent. Initially imagined as a depository for freed Black slaves in the US in 1847, the extreme class divisions and political corruption more typical of its modern history had already taken hold by the 1930s. In its effort to reverse the tides of white colonialism in Africa, the B.I. first targets those failed leftovers from state-sanctioned Back to Africa campaigns. What becomes quickly clear once the B.I. establishes its foothold, however, is that theirs is not a force of liberation from colonialism. Rather, the Black Internationale's ambition is to totalize the colonial project both on the Black continent and the white sea that surrounds it.

We know this because part of the B.I.'s social planning involves a rigid network of institutional apparatuses, including vibrant churches, schools, and athletics programs. And while those state apparatuses prove able to weave a nearly immutable social fabric conducive to the B.I.'s ambition, those historically external to the currents of modernization—notably, the Black indigenous population spread out across Africa—find themselves outside of Black modernization, too. Though at this point in the novel the B.I. has defeated nearly every major threat to its empire in

Africa, Slater and his romantic partner find themselves taken hostage after crashing their plane in the middle of the bush. Convinced that his skin color will save him from the 'brown men, naked except for breech cloths', Slater is given a quick lesson in colonial history: 'don't you know', a comrade remarks, 'that most of the French soldiers and aviators in these parts are black men? Oh no, color can't save us now' (Schuyler, 1991: 231). The 'cannibals' remind our colonial heroes that race has been redefined as a measure of power, and that in this moment Slater and company are as white as the Black Frenchmen for whom they are mistaken. While the B.I. is able to convert the geography of Africa into a literal and political force field to turn the tides of history, they can't erase that history.

This is perfectly consistent with the logic of race and history established in the first part of the novel, where what it means to be Black is to sit at the wrong end of the energy spectrum, and what it means to be part of the 'new negro' movement is to become an energy sovereign. In the novel's version of race, African aboriginals—the mythic origins of that other, more familiar, logic of race—are Black neither before the conquest of the continent, nor after. For if race in *Black Empire* is tied to the history of political and physical power, then those untouched by its energy infrastructure remain external its political inclusion, too. African aboriginals therefore make explicit the historicity of race and the racial determination of the novel's resource radicalism, and *Black Empire* dispenses with both racial sentimentalism and essentialism.

Schuyler's non-fictional coda, written a few weeks after the final installment of *Black Empire*, is perfectly consistent with the neo-conservatism with which he would later become associated, so long as both are read as critiques of racial essentialism in America and the 'new negro' movement that relied on it. Read as a solution to the problem of race in the 'new power economy', however, Schuyler's contribution to the energy novel genre is an unapologetic resource radicalism built not on an equality between races, but a struggle over the physical power that defines race's entanglement with energopower. The petromodernity already quieting the political promise of a solar system would nonetheless reproduce the promise of a Black Empire in Africa in the negative—a historical impossibility logically tied to that more familiar setting established by the fossil fuel revolution.

Acknowledgements

A special thanks is due to Dr. Jason Potts who first turned me to this novel during undergraduate supervision at StFX a long time ago.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bain, A** 2007 *Shocks Americana!: George Schuyler Serializes Black Internationalism*. *American Literary History*, 19: 937–963. 4 September.
- Blake, W P** 1871 Reports of the United States Commissioners to the Paris Universal Exposition. Washington: Government Printing Office.
- Boyer, D** 2014 Energopower: An Introduction. *Anthropology Quarterly*, 87(2): 309–334. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2014.0020>
- Canavan, G** 2018 Peak Oil after Hydrofracking. In: Bellamy, B and Diamanti, J (Eds.), *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*. Chicago: MCM' Press.
- Clery, D** 2010 Sending African Sunlight to Europe, Special Delivery. *Science*, 329: 782–783. 13 August.
- Gordon, J** 2001 *Solar Energy*. London: Routledge.
- Gruesser, J C** 2000 *Black on Black*. Louisville: University Press of Kentucky.
- Huber, M T** 2018 Building a “Green New Deal”: Lessons From Original New Deal. Verso, 19 November. Available at: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4131-building-a-green-new-deal-lessons-from-the-original-new-deal> (Last accessed 01 December 2018).
- International Institute for Sustainable Development** n.d. ‘Agriculture, Water and Investment’. Available at: <http://www.iisd.org/investment/research/agriculture.aspx> (Last accessed 11 April 2015).
- Kyrza, F T** 2003 *The Power of Light*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Leak, J B** (Ed.) 2011 *Race(ing) to the Right*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Marshall, K** 2013 *Corridors*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816679270.001.0001>
- Retman, S H** 2008 *Black No More: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism*. *PMLA*, 123(5): 1448–1464. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1448>

- Schneider-Mayerson, M** 2013 *Peak Oil*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schuyler, G** 1926 Negro Art Hokum. *Nation*, 122: 662–663. June 16.
- Schuyler, G** 1991 *Black Empire*. New York: Northwestern University Press.
- Szalay, M** 2000 *New Deal Modernism*. Durham: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381143>
- Taketani, E** 2010 Colored Empires in the 1930s: Black Internationalism, the U.S. Black Press, and George Samuel Schuyler. *American Literary History*, 82: 121–149. 1 March.
- Tal, K** 2002 'That Just Kills Me': Black Militant Near-Future Fiction. *Social Text*, 20(2): 65–91. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-65
- Veselá, P** 2011 Neither Black Nor White: The Critical Utopias of Sutton E. Griggs and George Schuyler. *Science Fiction Studies*, 38: 270–287. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.38.2.0270>

How to cite this article: Diamanti, J 2019 Resource Radicalism and the Solar System of *Black Empire*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 56, pp. 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.96>

Published: 13 September 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access logo, which is a stylized 'A' inside a circle.