

Tracing Akwaeke Emezi's Maps of Black Resistance

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Abstract

This article explores how Black literary counternarratives create sustainable resistance in today's U.S. politics, shaped by far-right and white supremacist rhetoric. Focusing on Akwaeke Emezi's speculative novels *Pet* (2019) and *Bitter* (2022), it argues that Emezi maps a practical ethics of collective liberation by showing how communities imagine beyond oppression, foster joy and connection, use language intentionally, and maintain principled action. Drawing on Ruha Benjamin's concept of the 'imaginary' and Adrienne Maree Brown's ideas of pleasure activism,

the article identifies four strategies: collective imagination, space for joy and connection, intentional language, and enduring ethical commitment, placing them within Black activist storytelling. A close reading of *Lucille*, the novels' shared city, demonstrates how Emezi connects utopian possibility to communal care, accountability, and antiviolent practice. Ultimately, Emezi's fiction shows resistance not just as opposition but also as world-building: reclaiming Black joy, reshaping the political imagination, and offering practical frameworks for freer futures.

Introduction: The Need for Black Counternarratives

The United States is at a pivotal moment regarding its acceptance of and approach to identities that have been historically othered by American society, especially in the racial and political rhetoric voiced by its citizens and government. Specifically, the rise of far-right Christian nationalism in U.S. politics has heavily depended on racist and anti-immigration language to amplify American white supremacists' fears of social decline, replacement, and the loss of white privilege, thus attempting to reframe hate as nationalism (Smith and King 460-61). The Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement reinvents the same anti-Black racial claims that scholars like historian John Hope Franklin have traced back to the nation's origins (Franklin and Higginbotham 48-62). As investigative reporter Nicholas Confessore states:

The resentment among whites feels both old and distinctly of this moment. It is shaped by the reality of demographic change, by a decade and a half of war in the Middle East, and by unease with the newly confident and confrontational activism of young blacks furious over police violence. It is mingled with patriotism, pride, fear and a sense that an America without them at its center is not really America anymore. (2)

MAGA narratives lean into historical white supremacist ideas of the dangerous other, emphasizing images of Black criminality and inferiority. These narratives justify hate—primarily driven by white fear—by “portraying more traditionalist whites as victims of liberal measures favoring people of color [...] shifting the core of racial conservatism away from color-blindness and toward policies designed directly to protect whites” (Smith and King 460). In reality, it is often the intervention of far-right white nationalists into Black spaces that leads to the few instances of violence they claim to defend against (Stanley-Becker). MAGA's anti-black propaganda relies on images of chaotic Black protests to fuel perceptions of unrest, which in turn encourages attempts to provoke communities of color into unruly acts, justifying the racial

hate and violence they already endorse. Nonetheless, Black communities have refused to be provoked, choosing instead to resist through alternative means, such as creating and circulating protest art, music, and narratives through traditional publication and social media. In addition, scholars such as activist Adrienne Maree Brown and sociologist Ruha Benjamin have produced multiple works discussing what these alternative forms of resistance look like and how to participate in them. Similarly, authors such as Akwaeke Emezi employ these strategies through their creative works, offering readers examples of what sustainable Black resistance can look like within our current social context.

This article aims to examine how Black literary and creative narratives model healthy and effective forms of resistance as a necessary response to far-right politics that have exploited entrenched racial tensions in the U.S. To demonstrate this, the article analyzes Akwaeke Emezi's novels *Pet* (2019) and *Bitter* (2022) as ideal case studies of Black resistance modeled through Black literary narratives. These novels present powerful counternarratives of Black resilience rooted in Black narrative traditions and grassroots activism outlined by Brown and Benjamin. This article will demonstrate how Emezi's work not only offers practical strategies for navigating today's political challenges but also envisions a future where all communities, particularly Black communities, can thrive. To do this, I've identified four strategies that Emezi's work utilizes when creating narratives of Black resistance: first, participating in collective imagination through narrative production; second, making space for connection and pleasure; third, using language thoughtfully and intentionally; and fourth, staying true to one's principles through ongoing effort. Each of these strategies is connected to larger Black activist, scholarly, and literary traditions. The article will start by establishing the first two strategies through an exploration of imagination and pleasure narratives as tools of Black resistance. The subsequent part will explore the last two strategies through a brief examination of historical Black counternarratives crafted during the Civil Rights Movement and by the Black Panther Party (BPP). Lastly, the final section will explore how all four strategies work together through a more in-depth look at Emezi's narrative of the fictional city of Lucille

as depicted in *Pet* and *Bitter*. The manifestation of these strategies in the novels is proof that Emezi demonstrates how Black counternarratives can serve as vital counterpoints to far-right rhetoric.

Imagination and Pleasure Narratives as Tools of Black Resistance

When MAGA engages in white supremacist propaganda, they build on the U.S.'s history of racial tensions by engaging with a long-standing crisis of imagination. Meaning that part of what makes propaganda, especially racial propaganda, so powerful is that it convinces both individuals and communities to imagine others and ourselves in specific roles—such as the dangerous others vs. the good white Christians. In her book *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024), Benjamin outlines how this crisis of imagination psychologically and socially impacts us by modeling how broader social conversations are woven into fundamental social systems, which, in turn, trains each of us to imagine everything through the lenses of political and social rhetorics. This rhetoric not only influences our laws and policies but also shapes our social imagination. Controlling a community's imagination limits what they believe is possible. In other words, people can only accomplish what they imagine is possible; therefore, if one does not want a person or community to occupy a particular space or demand specific opportunities, one limits a group's ability to picture themselves in that role. This effectively reduces the number of people willing to challenge the status quo or fight for change. White supremacist propaganda does not just restrict opportunities and communities; it constrains the imaginary, “which refers to collective projections of a desirable and feasible future” (Benjamin vii). To address the harm caused by white supremacist propaganda, we must confront and counteract its impact on our personal and collective imaginations, “as when we imagine different worlds together, writing shared stories and plotting futures in which we can all flourish” (Benjamin x). In other words, we need to participate in collective imagination by producing narratives that counter racial supremacy propaganda and allow all of us to imagine ourselves within a thriving future.

Emezi also addresses this crisis of imagination and need for counter-narratives in a 2019 interview with *Teen Vogue*: “Step one of making a new world is that you have to be able to imagine it. I think sometimes that is where the storytellers come in” (Bergado). Emezi emphasizes the importance of imagination as a tool for social change. However, what does that look like in the real world, and why are creative works like Emezi’s a necessary component of creating real-world social change? As Brown tells us in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017):

We are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable. Imagination leads people to believe they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else’s imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free. (20)

This ‘imagination battle’ that Brown discusses is in part what Confessore is referencing when he says that much of white America’s anger is connected to “a sense that an America without them at its center is not really America anymore” (2). For these individuals, creating an equitable America isn’t the goal because they can only envision America as a space of hierarchical privilege—one they currently benefit from. Therefore, Brown, like Benjamin and Emezi, maintains that a key part of any change strategy must include dedicating some of our time, attention, and labor towards healthy personal and collective imaginations to help us “intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (6). However, engaging in this imaginative work requires not only mental and physical

spaces but also an understanding of the impact imagination has on the individual, our relationships, and our communities.

I have found that speculative fiction, particularly Black speculative fiction, is a space that offers both the opportunity for generative imagination and a means to see the impact of what we collectively imagine. This is because speculative fiction encourages—if not demands—new imaginings through the creation of alternate worlds. For a work of speculative fiction to succeed, its author must intentionally engage a reader's imagination to depict a world different from the real world. To do this, Black speculative narratives draw on elements from diverse genres, including fantasy, science fiction, myth, religion, and folklore, to tell stories from a primarily Black perspective. In his article “Of Alien Abductions, Pocket Universes & Slave Narratives,” literary scholar Isaiah Lavender III argues that enslaved Black people responded to white narratives that positioned their bodies as inhuman objects by creating Afrofuturistic tales to foster an “evolution of hope” that helped Black people “withstand the horrors of slavery” (191). Through the creation and sharing of fantastical stories that blend themes of folklore, spiritual beliefs, fantasy, scientific practices, and oral history, Black slaves established a space for control, communication, culture, and pleasure. Even in contemporary times, with novels like *Pet* and *Bitter*, these storytelling practices continue serving as forms of resistance, allowing Black people to respond to trauma. Black speculative fiction, by design, provides a space for imaginings that can detach from, explore, or reimagine social hierarchies, political propaganda, systemic racism, and related structures. Moreover, speculative fiction has been utilized by activists and artists alike to explore human actions, recognize our shortcomings, and seek ways to address and improve them. Brown highlights this through her discussion of Octavia E. Butler, who, in works such as *Parable of the Sower* (1993), demonstrated that humanity's fatal flaw is a “combination of hierarchy and intelligence” (*Emergent Strategy* 9). As Brown continues to explain, “we are brilliant at survival, but brutal at it. We tend to slip out of togetherness the way we slip out of the womb, bloody and messy and surprised to be alone” (9). As a result, Brown engages with speculative fiction in part because the genre lends itself to creating spaces

that both acknowledge human flaws and our capacity for change—an interest Emezi echoes and centers in *Bitter* and *Pet*. Both Brown and Emezi foreground speculative fiction as a strategy for crafting Black counternarratives that illustrate what it means to imagine and pursue communities that envision power as collective rather than hierarchical.

Emezi's *Pet* and *Bitter* model multiple approaches to imagining and creating futures where all can flourish. An example of Emezi's activist imaginings is their depictions of Eucalyptus, the specialized arts high school attended by the eponymous main character, Bitter. Through Eucalyptus, the characters engage with a radically inclusive education system built on an anti-classist, anti-racist pedagogy that embraces education's role in uplifting a community. However, Emezi also acknowledges that education is only one path; thus, they created Assata, a fictional grassroots organization named after Assata Olugbala Shakur, an American political activist and former member of the BPP. Via Assata, Emezi introduces us to a large, multifaceted, and well-established social justice community that not only organizes traditional protests but also builds community spaces for people of all ages. Assata offers childcare and educational spaces and works to connect its members with other helpful organizations and institutions, such as Eucalyptus, to ensure each community member has spaces they will both enjoy and thrive in. Though the inner workings of Assata are not critical to *Bitter*'s plot, Emezi takes the time to explain them to the reader so that we understand that Assata greatly values pleasure, exploration, and connection, and fights for everyone's right to a thriving future.

Emezi writes these spaces of resistance into their works because their main characters are intended to represent real U.S. residents who, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc., are trapped within and by the imaginings of those higher in the American social hierarchy. In *Bitter*, Emezi designed Lucille to mirror the social hierarchies of the U.S., then created spaces like Assata and Eucalyptus to provide room for the characters to develop their own imaginings. In *Pet*, Emezi then flips this script by depicting a more utopian Lucille, giving readers, particularly Black American readers, the opportunity to engage with characters who

represent them, helping them imagine and even work towards a future where they and their communities can thrive. Through the examples of Eucalyptus and Assata, Emezi shows readers that if the U.S. ever hopes to create a society free of social and systemic injustice, our community members need to imagine, develop, and uphold an ethics we can stand by, along with a sustainable strategy for living in accordance with those values. Emezi, like Benjamin and Brown, is working to build a society that embraces collective freedom—a holistic freedom acknowledging the individual need to earn a living while also engaging in a fully realized, healthy life free from physical, social, and emotional violence. Emezi's work values multiple forms of freedom, including “sexual freedom; social justice; abolition of all forms of bondage and incarceration; freedom from exploitation; freedom of movement; freedom as movement, as a collective striving for real democracy” (Davis and Kelly 7), which is depicted through the ways that Assata governs itself.

This conceptualization of collective freedom signifies not just a shared politics but also a shared understanding of the importance of personal and communal pleasure, which connects with the second strategy I've identified. In her work *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019), Brown discusses the importance of supporting our communities' and our own journeys towards pleasure as a form of liberation. As Brown tells us, there is a profound “connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational, and communal power” (6). Conversely, denying pleasure prevents people from connecting to their full selves and needs, which Brown says makes us more likely to be at odds with ourselves and others. In other words, to achieve collective freedom, one must also imagine and create a place for personal and collective pleasure. Emezi's work is particularly powerful in this regard because the communities and characters they create always make room for pleasure as a key aspect of social change. Some of the best examples of this are the quiet moments between friends:

Blessing sat on the bed, stretching her legs out in front of her. [...] Bitter hid a smile. The two girls had been friends for years, since

they'd both come to this school [...]. Blessing had been the one who shaved Bitter's head for the first time [...] and Bitter had kept her curls cropped close since then, because she could, because here she was as free as she'd ever been. They both knew how special that was. (*Bitter* 4-5)

This moment occurs when the only thing we know about Bitter is that she is deeply afraid of the world around her because of her trauma. Yet, the next thing Emezi shares with readers about Bitter's life is her deeply pleasurable friendship with Blessing. Built on intimate moments like shaving Bitter's head, each girl shows acceptance and commitment to the other. Bitter and Blessing cherish their friendship for the joy, connection, and acceptance it brings, especially as young queer Black girls. Brown and Emezi value pleasure for several reasons, including its ability to build social connections, shape our imaginations, remind us of our value as humans, and make activism sustainable and joyful. However, both authors also highlight the importance of seeing Black people, and particularly queer Black women and non-binary people, experiencing pleasure. For a host of reasons, Black pain has become normalized to the point that Black joy is often treated as a violation of the status quo. This can be seen throughout American history through various attacks on and appropriation of Black culture, fashion, and pleasure, hence why Bitter was touched by Blessing's acceptance of and assistance with shaving her head. This is also why anti-Black rhetoric often targets Black pleasure as much as, if not more than, Black labor, movement, or perceived criminality. Pleasure is powerful because it is connected to concepts such as curiosity, achievement, or shame; it helps us cope with trauma and creates space for self-actualization by encouraging exploration of "the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing" (Brown, *Pleasure Activism* 3-4). In short, a commitment to imagination and pleasure is vital to sustaining social change. As evidenced by the presence of these principles in both contemporary and, as will be discussed next, historical examples of Black resistance narratives.

Historic Examples of Resistance: Black Counternarratives Centering Intentional Language and Community-Oriented Ethical Commitments

These strategies of resistance through Black counternarratives that I have identified are not only evident in contemporary literary and activist conversations but also build on a rich historical tradition of Black literature and activism, as can be seen through the Civil Rights Movement and the BPP, two excellent examples of Black activist and political movements that recognized the importance of authors, artists, and creatives in advancing a movement. Though both movements engage in imagination and pleasure narratives as part of their strategies, what best connects them to Emezi's work is their thoughtful, intentional use of language that values staying true to one's principles through ongoing effort—the third and fourth narrative strategies I've outlined. For example, texts such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" had profound influence within the Civil Rights Movement—both for what Dr. King expressed and for the compassionate and insightful perspectives on Black life, morals, struggle, and visions of a Black future they offer. Additionally, works such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew" (1962) offer narratives that depict various forms of Black struggle while challenging problematic narratives of Black ignorance, criminality, and rage. All four texts eloquently explain why Black individuals may feel compelled to engage in acts of resistance, and each encourages more peaceful forms of resistance, which is also a core value in Emezi's novel *Pet*. However, like Emezi's novel *Bitter*, each of these texts also uses careful language selection to acknowledge Black frustration, anger, and understandings of why some Black people may be systematically driven to act out due to the social systems and racist imaginings they are trapped by, in a way that emphasizes how systemic oppression and hatred damage Black communities and people. Nevertheless, they also show that violence is rarely, if ever, the chosen path to counter white supremacist narratives, which argue that segregation and Jim Crow laws were necessary to

protect white communities from assumed 'bad behavior' among Black people.

This recognition of Black creatives as key figures of social change is further emphasized by the BPP, whose leadership not only produced their own speeches and political rhetoric of Black nationalism but also strategically endeavored "to create an alternative to the dominant paradigm at the margin of white society, from 'behind the veil,' that demonstrated a vibrant and vital Black culture under its own terms using its own language" (Duncan 119). The BPP recognized that achieving social change requires not solely changing laws and policies but also challenging mindsets and combating false narratives. The BPP engaged in political action but also valued cultural representation. They knew that to be effective, they needed to project a strong Black visual image, making the community "visible" and conveying strength to counteract the deeply embedded stereotypes accepted by much of mainstream society (Duncan 118). These approaches, in addition to questioning existing anti-Black stories rooted in white supremacy, also provide a map for imagining a thriving and sustainable Black future, a vision Emezi echoes in *Bitter*.

Furthermore, many of the strategies Emezi's Assata engages in are the same as those used by the BPP. For instance, the majority of values that Assata upholds, and problems they work to change, directly echo the BPP's Ten-Point Program, including advocating for the power to determine their community's path through communal governance, a desire to protect Black owned businesses from systemic corruption, and demands for decent housing, education that acknowledges Black contributions to society, and the end of police brutality (Hilliard 74-77). Assata utilizes strategies from both the Civil Rights Movement and the BPP that center on maintaining their principles through sustainable, ongoing effort.

Like the Civil Rights Movement, Assata understands that social change is a long and hard fight; thus, they thoroughly train their young adults in peaceful protest strategies to keep them as safe as possible when facing agitators and violence. However, like the BPP, they also understand that it takes more than protesting to create the change they

wish to see. Because of this, Assata takes steps to physically defend their communities against attacks—something the BPP was famous for—by ensuring their safe house is warded and secure (*Bitter* 174-81). However, Assata also takes steps to maintain their mental protections through more pleasure-based strategies, such as building a learning center and spaces for relaxation and rejuvenation (*Bitter* 157-73). In fact, although to outsiders such as Bitter, Assata is best known for organizing protests, once Bitter actually visits their community, she learns that the majority of their efforts are focused on building thriving communities and alternative imaginings of the world, which results in their artists, healers, and farmers being treated with the same respect given to their protest leaders. Like the Civil Rights Movement and the BPP, Emezi via Assata demonstrates that the only way to maintain the energy required for sustained change is to value what every member brings to the table in ways that help them prepare their community for a future, not just a fight.

Emezi's Narrative of Lucille: An Ideal Black Counternarrative

Thus far, I have outlined four interconnected narrative strategies of Black resistance, situating Emezi's work within broader Black activist storytelling traditions. Next, I will focus on how Emezi develops the city of Lucille, first introduced in the novel *Pet*, as follows:

There shouldn't be any monsters left in Lucille. [...] They used to be everywhere [...]. They used to be the police and teachers and judges and even the mayor; yeah, the mayor used to be a monster. Lucille has a different mayor now. This mayor is an angel; the last couple of mayors have all been angels. Not like a from-heaven, not-quite-real type of angel but a from-behind-and-inside-and-in-front-of-the-revolution, therefore-very-real type of angel. (1)

In this opening paragraph, it is already evident how Emezi demonstrates the four strategies I've identified. First, we see how Lucille participates in collective imagination through narrative production. As Jam shares her city's narrative, her tone undeniably echoes that of

a child repeating a story she was told her whole life. As part of her storytelling, Jam highlights the safe, more pleasurable aspects of her city through intentional labels, “angels” and “monsters.” In *Pet*, angels are people, such as the members of Assata, who throughout *Bitter*’s plot fought for the social change necessary to make Lucille into the utopia depicted in *Pet*. Monsters, on the other hand, are those that Assata fought against, people who would harm others for their own comfort, pleasure, and wealth. Lastly, Jam’s recounting of Lucille’s history highlights that, to her, this is an old story, meaning her community has successfully practiced staying true to its principles through ongoing effort, which has shaped Lucille’s narrative into one of resistance, equity, and potential utopia. Emezi also uses the speculative elements of *Pet* and *Bitter* to challenge our imagination by playing with mythical concepts of monsters and angels, including fearsome-looking biblical angels, such as the eponymous Pet, who can be summoned into the human world by creative humans like Jam and her mother, Bitter. In the novels, creatures like Pet are portrayed as awe-inspiring and horrifying, in part because of their looks, but also because each has its own motivations and ethics that are nearly incomprehensible to humans. Though some, such as Pet, do grow fond of humans and choose to embrace their strategies for change, most biblical angels firmly believe that the only way to effect change is through violence against those they deem monsters. Thus, Emezi forces the human characters, and, by extension, the reader, to confront the flaws in our morals and ethics as a key part of the imaginative work we participate in when picturing ideal futures. In doing so, Emezi uses their characters to help readers practice applying sustainable principles by prompting readers to question their own ethics across multiple situations.

Namely, Pet enters Jam’s world to hunt a human-monster, and if Pet got their way, they—with Jam as their anchor and guide to the human world—would murder this person. Pet’s claim that there is still a monster in Lucille challenges Jam’s belief in her community and, more specifically, her parents, Bitter and Aloe, who insist that they have already gotten rid of all the monsters in Lucille—an insistence that Jam comes to understand is based on trauma and the fear of what could be

lost if they were forced to fight again. Thus, Jam is obliged to reconcile herself to the fact that she cannot continue to unquestioningly trust what her community tells her, because Pet is correct. There is a monster in Lucille. Hibiscus—someone Jam knew and trusted, a friend of her parents, a former member of Assata, and celebrated as an angel. However, Hibiscus is also a pedophile, utilizing his status as an angel to actively hide his crimes; who, when confronted by Jam's friend, responds by saying:

I ain't doing shit, boy. Your little brother is confused, that's all. You already tried talking to your parents, didn't you, and what did they all say? That you're acting up, right? [...] Ain't nobody listening to y'all kids. This is Lucille. The shit you're talking about doesn't happen anymore, everyone knows that. You can't make it come back just by telling stories when you feel like it. (*Pet* 182)

Hence, Jam has to wrestle with both Pet's desire to kill Hibiscus and the fact that the only way to stop Hibiscus' abuse is for them to intervene. However, while Pet correctly identified Hibiscus as a monster, Jam points out that Pet's desired response is also monstrous. Reflecting on the long-term consequences of Pet's ideal future, where fearsome creatures suddenly appear to harm Lucille's citizens without—from their perspectives—reason, Jam realizes that Pet's ideal would not only plague Lucille with violence, but also remove human agency, creating a system more akin to terrorism than to justice. This realization helps both Jam and the readers understand that Lucille's strength lies in humans who choose empathy, equity, justice, and communal care while rejecting self-deception and violence. Lucille became a utopia because characters like Jam—and Bitter before her—refuse to allow monstrous behavior to dominate even in themselves; rather, they focus on helping everyone improve and thrive.

As a city, Lucille is portrayed as a largely realistic community that primarily reflects Black American experiences, with significant references to the lived realities of individuals across the African diaspora and other minority groups. From a teenage Bitter's perspective, Lucille

is described as “a brutal city to live in,” reflecting the trauma Bitter faced from a young age (Emezi, *Bitter* 1). Alternatively, from Bitter’s friend Eddie’s perspective, Lucille is a community with people like Mr. Nelson, the watermelon man, who brings pleasure to their community by providing homegrown food and pies made from scratch. It is through people such as Eddie and Eucalyptus’ Principal Miss Virtue that *Bitter*’s imaginings of Lucille start to center places of pleasure such as Eucalyptus and Assata’s safe houses, both of which were “designed for the lost ones, the abandoned ones, designed to hold them safe and tell them they never had to leave again” (160-61). Ultimately, through this mix of perspectives, the reader learns that Lucille is a typical sprawling American city, where most of the population, including the Assata members and Eucalyptus students, lives in the central area, surrounded by suburban and rural regions. A significant portion of the population, if not the majority, are people of color, many of whom are working class and often victimized by police brutality supported by political and corporate corruption. In this regard, Lucille resembles cities such as Chicago and Washington, D.C., an interesting comparison, as those are among the cities where President Donald Trump recently deployed the National Guard under the pretext of controlling crime, thereby undermining the autonomy of these liberal cities. Although *Pet* and *Bitter* predate Trump’s second term, Emezi’s ability to predict the types of cities targeted by this kind of white supremacist rhetoric and violence highlights the historical prevalence of Trump’s tactics. Part of what makes Lucille’s story so believable is that the human ‘angels’ of Lucille’s revolution first had to challenge their own imaginings of what their city could be; they then had to create counternarratives to the harmful narratives dominating their city, and finally, they had to make a multigenerational commitment to maintain their community’s newfound ethics. This is demonstrated by *Pet*’s introduction of Lucille’s utopian potential, and in the prequel, *Bitter*, we get a glimpse of the war these characters fought to achieve the peace they have.

During the events of *Pet*, we observe utopian Lucille. In this community, everyone can build comfortable, sustainable lives by using their strengths and interests to benefit all. For example, Jam’s mother, Bitter,

is a highly respected artist, and her father, Aloe, is a medical professional who combines traditional medicine with the arts. As Jam seeks advice and help from community members, we meet many adults who demonstrate different ways of embracing, loving, and building community. However, the most important example of this is Jam herself:

When Jam was a toddler, she'd refused to speak, which was why they'd taught her to sign instead. She [...] saved her voice for the most important one—screamed out during her first and only temper tantrum, when she was three, when someone had complimented her for the thousandth time by calling her “such a handsome little boy” and Jam had flung herself on the floor [...] screaming her first word with explosive sureness.

“Girl! Girl! Girl!”

Bitter had stared before laughing. “All right, sweetness,” she'd said, [...] thinking back on several arguments they'd had about Jam's clothes, when Jam would sign refusal over and over. “That explains that.” (*Pet* 15-16)

Jam's community, and particularly her parents, never consider challenging her identity or resisting what makes her most comfortable because the people of Lucille are genuinely free to live their truths. As a result, we see a model for building a community where, through communication, empathy, and respect, everyone can explore, express, and live their identities in ways that strengthen Lucille as a community. It is this continual communal commitment and labor that make Lucille realistically utopian.

However, the analysis has so far focused on Lucille's utopian aspects. Yet, in *Bitter*, readers encounter the earlier generation—teenage Bitter, Aloe, and others—struggling against corrupt politicians and billionaires exploiting working-class communities of color, with these injustices enforced by police violence. Bitter and Aloe face a reality where young activists are hurt and even murdered for protesting. Their friend Eddie even gets her eye shot out deliberately by the police while peacefully protesting. The characters in *Bitter* are traumatized, yet they respond to

that trauma by further building communities, as envisioned by Assata's collective imagination, reflected in their depiction as a revolutionary force and an organized group that extends across all levels of community life. When offered to use the biblical angels' supernatural violence to enforce their will, they refuse, because although it will be a battle to change their city on their terms, that is a fight worth having. As their leader, Ube explains:

"The angel had a point when it said the world gotta burn before we can build a new one. We just got different ideas about what kinda fire we need, you know?"

Miss Virtue looked amused. "How do you know your way is the right way?"

"I don't. But we moving with love, and I figure that can't be wrong." (*Bitter* 197)

Assata is committed to ethical social change by embodying their counternarratives of community building and empathy. They thoughtfully and intentionally reinforce this through their language, manifesting that the community's strength is built on mutual support. For example, when Bitter panics during the burning of Lucille, they stop to comfort her, calming her down by first surrounding and physically supporting her, and then emotionally and psychologically supporting each other by reciting the final lines of Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "Paul Robeson," blocking out the sounds of surrounding violence: "We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond" (196). This very deliberate use of language, combined with physical comfort, serves as a mantra to sustain their commitment to each other's well-being, even as the city literally burns to the ground, helping them stay true to their principles of "moving with love" (197). Plus, they achieve all this while making room for pleasure.

Pleasure is explored in various ways throughout Lucille's narrative, including joyful multigenerational bonding and communal care, as seen in student-mentor bonds such as Bitter's with her principal, Miss Virtue, and Jam's connection to Ube, who became a librarian. Also, numerous

deep friendships are shown, several of which bloom into romance, such as Bitter and Aloe's:

"You are so beautiful," he said, [...] "Is it okay if I kiss you?" Bitter [...] managed a nod, and [...] [h]is lips brushed against Bitter's, and every nerve in her body was instantly scalded with heat singing loudly through her. She [...] kissed him back, not caring that everyone in the café could see them, because in that moment, it felt like anything was possible, even another world. (*Bitter* 44-45)

Bitter and Aloe maintain their romance across decades, revolutions, events of biblical magnitude, and parenthood. This romance is not merely a side plot, but a vital part of the strategies I've identified and that Emezi maps out in their works, ultimately demonstrating the importance of participating in collective imagination through narrative production, making space for connection and pleasure, using language thoughtfully and intentionally, staying true to one's principles through ongoing effort, and sustainable social change, if one is going to create the strategic Black counternarratives necessary to build a socially just future.

Conclusion: What Emezi's Work Models

Akwaeke Emezi's speculative fiction offers a vital blueprint for mapping Black counternarratives that resist persistent far-right rhetoric and white supremacist propaganda. By drawing on rich traditions of Black storytelling, Emezi's work demonstrates how imagination, intentional language, ethical commitment, and the pursuit of pleasure can serve as powerful tools for both individual and collective liberation. The city of Lucille, as depicted in *Pet* and *Bitter*, serves as a Black counternarrative for a realistically utopian community, one that is not perfect but is sustained by ongoing communal care, empathy, and a refusal to accept hierarchical oppression. Emezi's narratives remind us that resistance is not only about confronting injustice but also about envisioning and nurturing new worlds where Black joy, creativity, and connection are central. The strategies outlined in this article—collective imagination,

thoughtful language, principled effort, and the creation of space for pleasure—are more than plot points; they are actionable frameworks for real-world change. In embracing these lessons, we are called to continuously work toward communities that value freedom, care, and the flourishing of all their members. Ultimately, Emezi's work challenges readers to imagine beyond pain and toward pleasure, to resist not only through protest but also through the radical act of storytelling as Black counternarrative production, which reclaims the future for Black communities and all who seek justice.

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Biography

Dr. Cassandra Scherr serves as an Assistant Professor in the English Department at St. John Fisher University. Her research focuses on African American literature and the creative works of the African Diaspora, examining how these texts utilize speculative and artistic elements to convey significant activist narratives. By

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