

## **“O Neg Be Like Water”: The Racial Politics of Blood and Water in Sherri L. Smith’s *Orleans***

A speculative YA novel, *Orleans* is set in the Mississippi River Delta in a dystopian, post-Katrina U.S. Having been hit by six more hurricanes, the eruption of violence and deadly Delta Fever result in the Outer States’ quarantine of the region. The novel opens with a Declaration of Separation signed in 2025 by the U.S. president, Senate, House of Representatives, and governors of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas that positions the aforementioned states behind a wall monitored by drones. In intercutting between the first-person narrative of 16-year-old Orleans-local Fen and the third-person limited narrative of Daniel -- an Outer States scientist seeking access to a potential source of cure in the Delta-- *Orleans* situates readers within this region, which is simultaneously alive and dying. Water is central to this contradiction as it carries Fever: the threatening context and motivator for the people of the Delta. Fever is an internal and external threat as both water and human bodies carry it. At the same time, *Orleans* celebrates Orleans – the “new” is dropped – as a conglomeration of ethnically mixed communities that are themselves the lifeblood of a region that Daniel, like many in the Outer States, assume is dead.

While Fen asserts that skin color no longer matters, the tribal division by blood-type in Smith’s dystopia establishes an analogy for racism. People are infected differently depending on their blood type, motivating the O Positives and O Negatives to seek safety through cooperation and the heavily tattooed AB tribe to seek war and domination. Driven by fear, greed, and illness, hunters and slavers in the Delta attack the vulnerable. Compounded by this blood-type tribalism, racism is in fact pervasive, surrounding and shaping people like the water of the Delta. *Orleans* invites readers to connect this dystopia to contemporary New Orleans’ ongoing confrontation with histories and legacies of settler colonialism and slavery.

Drawing on an analysis of the novel that leans heavily on children’s literary, utopian, speculative-fiction, critical race, and postcolonial theory, we argue that *Orleans* opens a powerful critical space in young adult literature and thereby constitutes a timely and important intervention.