

## Race and ethnicity in science fiction

Science fiction and the criticism of the genre have so far paid very little attention to the treatment of issues relating to race and ethnicity. The African-Caribbean writer Nalo Hopkinson says about her sf novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), 'I saw it as subverting the genre which speaks so much about the experience of being alienated, but contains so little written by alienated people themselves.'<sup>1</sup> Most English-language sf is written by whites. While some African-American writers produce work that has fantastic or magical elements, this work is not generally grouped with sf or fantasy; it is instead published as and treated by critics as African-American literature. The magical realist elements of Mexican, Native American or Indian subcontinent literatures are also not published or reviewed as speculative literature. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1980), for example, explores Indian independence and the tensions between Moslems and Hindus through the eyes of a boy who is one of a group of children born with powers such as telepathy, but it is not generally considered science fiction. Samuel R. Delany and other black authors, including Charles Saunders and Walter Mosley, have written about the racial issues connected to the field, ranging from the initial cold-shoulder treatment of Delany by racist old-guard white writers to the lack of a substantial black audience for the genre, but neither sf about race nor criticism of it have achieved the same prominence that works about gender issues have.<sup>2</sup>

Science fiction writers can use its imaginative possibilities to hypothesize worlds where existing social problems have been solved; they can also imagine a future where the problems have been magnified or extended into a grim dystopia. At the same time, however, they are bound and constructed by numerous other forces, including their own culture and experiences and their publisher's expectations and target audience. Being able to publish one's work in many ways comes out of a position of privilege, including both the education and the time for writing, and consequently those people who are oppressed the most are the ones least likely to be writing about it. Further,

since racism often appears different to members of a minority than to members of a majority or dominant culture, what one white writer or reader perceives as a socially progressive work might be seen by a reader of colour as engaging with racist tropes or as an appropriation of the values and concerns of a minority culture. When sf writers, white or not, include racial issues in their fiction, they enter a territory bounded on one side by readers who feel that the work does not go far enough to address the social ills of the culture they write in and on the other by readers who think it goes too far.

By far the majority of sf deals with racial tension by ignoring it. In many books the characters' race is either not mentioned and probably assumed to be white or, if mentioned, is irrelevant to the events of the story and functions only as an additional descriptor, such as hair colour or height. Other sf assumes a world in which there has been substantial racial mingling and the characters all have ancestry of multiple races. These kinds of writing can be seen as an attempt to deal with racial issues by imagining a world where they are non-issues, where colour-blindness is the norm. This may be a conscious model for a future society, or a gesture to 'political correctness' by an author whose interests in the story lie elsewhere, but either motive avoids wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve their culture. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison sees many American texts as written in a response to an unarticulated black presence, as defining themselves by what they are not.<sup>3</sup> She further writes about the presence of people of colour as invisible to many writers and readers, just as it is invisible to much of the American population in general. Sheree R. Thomas expresses this same absence through the metaphor of 'dark matter': matter in the universe which cannot be observed directly but only deduced by its gravitational force. She views Africans and African-Americans as unseen but still affecting the world around them.<sup>4</sup> Even sf which does not explicitly delve into racial issues may still respond to them.

One recent example of this is Mike Resnick's book *A Miracle of Rare Design* (1994), which displaces the tension between Western culture and African culture on to a story line about humans and aliens. The book begins with a human, Xavier William Lennox, on the planet Grotomana, trying to observe the Grotomanans, known as Fireflies. The Fireflies have forbidden humans to have any access to their cities, so he is from the very beginning of the novel a transgressor. He sneaks into a religious ceremony, is caught and tortured, and left as a warning for other humans. While he is recovering from this event he is approached about a diplomatic mission back to Grotomana, the goal being to give the human Republic mining rights to diamonds. The

exchange between Lennox and the representative of the Department of Alien Affairs, after he asks what happens if they refuse, is significant:

‘Then the navy will move in with as much force as is required to pacify the natives and protect our mining operation.’

‘*Pacify*,’ repeated Lennox, unable to keep the contempt from his voice. ‘A polite euphemism for genocide.’<sup>5</sup>

While he violated the Fireflies’ culture in order to observe their ritual, and while he thinks of them as ‘primitive’,<sup>6</sup> he does not approve of genocide.

Lennox later returns to the Firefly planet in a surgically altered body which is physiologically Grotoman. As a Firefly, he is mistreated by human soldiers, and remarks to their commander that ‘If that’s the way you treat unarmed Fireflies, it’s no wonder they want you off the planet.’<sup>7</sup> He is beginning to understand the alien world-view through his biological transformation. Yet when he tells the commander that he took on the new body in order to prevent genocide, the commander remarks that he has ‘done nothing to prevent the extermination of other alien races’.<sup>8</sup> The reason for Lennox’s willingness to undergo such radical surgery is his curiosity about other cultures rather than any interest in what serves those cultures best.

This turns out to be the driving force of the character and the theme of the novel; Lennox undergoes repeated physical transformations and visits several other planets at the behest of the human Republic. However, the threat of genocide seems to only serve the purpose of providing an excuse for Lennox’s cultural interference. The alien races are all portrayed as less civilized than humans, and no one ever asks if they have the right to keep humans from their planet or their resources. They are not, in other words, seen as equals with humans, just as Africans were not seen as equals by Europeans. Resnick’s intent appears to be to show that his other races have abilities and capacities that are as special and important as any human, but this is undermined by Lennox’s continual change, which is in many ways an appropriation of the African-American motif of ‘passing’. Although Lennox’s interest is in the cultural artefacts such as stories, religion, language and music of the different aliens he encounters, he is ultimately a colonizer. He takes what he wants from each culture and moves on to the next. The novel never steps outside the viewpoint of the dominant race or tries to imagine a solution to the problems of the encounters between two cultures; the encounters are only excuses for Lennox’s next appropriation. The alien, Other, presence is shaped only by its relation to Lennox and not by itself. As much as Lennox becomes marginalized from human society, the novel evades any meaningful examination of marginalization and postcolonial conflict.

Resnick's novel is an example of how sf can respond to the history of Western and African cultural intersections, but it is silent about how the dominant culture is shaped by the minority culture. To further understand the problematic nature of such cultural shaping in sf, it is useful to look at sf that has dealt explicitly with racial relationships. One early story is 'The Comet' (1920), by the black writer W. E. B. Du Bois, better known for his writings about being black in early twentieth-century America. In this story, a black man named Jim, who has been sent into the dangerous lower vaults of a bank because a white man's life is too valuable for the risk, emerges to discover that all the people in New York appear to be dead as the result of the earth passing through the tail of a comet. The only other living person he finds is a white, upper-class young woman. Jim thinks that she would never have even looked at him previously and she realizes that she would never have imagined him as her rescuer because 'he dwelt in a world so far from hers, so infinitely far, that he seldom even entered her thought'.<sup>9</sup> But in the absence of other people as they search together for their families and other survivors she begins to see him as human. Later, however, her father arrives to rescue her. She thanks Jim and does not look at him as her father declares that he has always 'liked your people'<sup>10</sup> and gives him money, an act which classifies Jim as a servant and puts him back into the role of someone less than human.

In Du Bois's story, a thought experiment that investigates how much racial difference is constructed by society, racial difference is overcome only when Jim and the woman think themselves entirely alone in the world. As soon as other people enter, the old codes, rules and belief systems about race re-enter: African-Americans are not perceived as human by white Americans even while they are relied upon to do work that keeps society functioning, a view so entrenched in the culture that only a huge natural disaster can change it. Du Bois argues that racism lies in cultural practices as much or more than in individual beliefs.

One of the most notable examples of the exploration of race relations in sf is Ray Bradbury's short story 'Way In the Middle of the Air', part of *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), a book that replays issues of colonialism and race relations through the human invasion of and eventual settlement on Mars. 'Way In the Middle of the Air' specifically looks at African-Americans and white Americans and the way in which the whites define their existence through the lives of the blacks.

In the story, the blacks in the American south all leave for Mars. The main character, a white hardware-store proprietor named Samuel Teece, declares that the blacks 'should've given notice'. He and other white men sit on the porch of his hardware store and watch the 'slow, steady channel

of darkness',<sup>11</sup> the blacks of the town leaving. They do not know who will do the jobs once taken by the black men and women. Teece tries to prevent two different blacks from leaving because of their obligations to him, but the debts of one is paid by other blacks and the work contract of another is taken over by a white on Teece's porch so the youth, Silly, can leave. Teece mocks him, asking if the rocket ships have the names of spirituals. Silly does not respond to his mockery at the time, but as he drives off out of earshot he shouts, 'What are you goin' to *do* nights, Mr. Teece?'<sup>12</sup> Teece thinks about the question and slowly realizes that Silly was asking him what he would do now that there is no one left to lynch. He has relied on blacks to be there not just to work for him but to be his victims. One might imagine that a racist white would be glad to see the blacks leave the world, but racism depends on the presence of those it hates. He and his fellow whites depend upon the blacks not just economically but also as a way to identify themselves by what they are not. Without a black presence, Teece has very little left of himself. Even though the story is chronologically set in the early twenty-first century, it is really the American south of the mid twentieth century that is depicted; Bradbury is writing not about the future but about his present.

Yet, even while the story unflinchingly depicts white racism, not just through lynching but through the characters' language and comments, one person saying, 'They make almost as good a money as a white man, but there they go', it does not fully show African-Americans as people, instead using stereotypes of African-American culture to reveal their absence. The blacks leaving are metaphorically transformed into a river, and silence replaces the sounds of song and laughter and 'pickaninnies rushing in clear water'. Left in the fields with the empty shacks are 'unfingerprinted' watermelons.<sup>13</sup> Bradbury uses sf effectively to portray white racism, but the story does not take the opportunity to reimagine a black culture independent of white perceptions. The story of the expansion of the African diaspora to Mars is never told.

For both Du Bois and Bradbury, sf provided a means to examine the simultaneous dependence on and contempt for black Americans by white Americans. What could not be imagined in a conventional, mainstream story can be described in sf, rendering the invisible visible, even if only for the duration of time it takes to read the story. In these stories, sf matters not for any predictive or imaginative aspects but for its capacity to reveal something about the era in which the stories were written. In exposing the racism of the world in which they were published, the stories subvert any comfortable escape from a white reader's own culture and beliefs and perhaps even create a momentary experience of readerly alienation.

Bradbury was not the only white writer to imagine black characters, however, and Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) needs to be discussed alongside 'Way In the Middle of the Air'. Heinlein's novel is about a white family transported to a future in which America is ruled by blacks who practice slavery, polygamy and cannibalism. It was written and published during the early days of the American Civil Rights movement and appears to be a response to the changes happening to the American social order. In one significant exchange, a black character, Joseph, who had been a servant to the white family, says to the lead character, Hugh Farnham, '[H]ave you ever made a bus trip through Alabama? As a "nigger"?' When Hugh responds that he has not, Joseph says, 'Then shut up. You don't know what you are talking about.'<sup>14</sup> This suggests that Heinlein at some level understood how much black Americans were dehumanized and brutalized by white Americans in the south, but his depiction of a black civilization that relies on slavery and cannibalism continues the process of dehumanizing and seeing blacks as Other. He does not imagine a world where blacks and whites live together equally and freely but a world in which one has dominance over the other. Heinlein, who had non-white protagonists in some of his other fiction, clearly understood that racism needs to be addressed as a social issue. Yet in this book he was unable to see beyond the limits of his own experience and replace black absence with meaningful presence.

Cultures do not arise ahistorically, however, and the racial tensions in American society which are depicted in the works discussed above come in part out of the history of African enslavement. Science fiction can also be about the past, through alternate history or time-travel plots, and some latter twentieth-century novels make use of these devices specifically to write about racial issues and slavery. In Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979), a twentieth-century woman travels back to a Maryland plantation in the early nineteenth century; Orson Scott Card's novel *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (1996) takes as its historical frame the European conquest of the Americas.

In *Kindred* the main character is a black woman named Dana who is drawn into the past of her distant ancestors whenever Rufus Weylin, the son of a plantation owner, is endangered. She knows from her family Bible that the white Rufus will grow up to father the daughter who is her several-times removed grandmother, and she speculates that she is being pulled back in time to keep her ancestry intact. One time she is accompanied by her white husband, Kevin Franklin, who is forced to pose as her owner and is stranded in the past for five years when she returns briefly to the twentieth century. The time travel has no technological explanation; Dana simply feels dizzy and is

pulled back to Rufus by his need. Her returns to her era are precipitated by her own fear or mortal danger.

Butler's narrative also tells the history of Dana and Kevin's relationship, and she comments not only on the conditions of the past but the conditions of 1976 America. Other family members are unhappy about their marriage: Dana's uncle is disappointed because Kevin is white, and Kevin's sister surprises him with her bigotry. Dana's aunt would prefer that Dana marry a black man, but is pleased that if they have children they will be lighter-skinned blacks than Dana. What is more telling about twentieth-century views of race, however, is what happens to Dana and Kevin in the past.

After spending some time on the plantation, Kevin comments: '[T]his place isn't what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage . . .'<sup>15</sup> He is becoming used to slavery. As a white, he does not see the things Dana does in the slave quarters, but he also does not look for them. He never thinks slavery is good, and when he is stranded he sees things that do show some of the conditions to be as bad or worse than he could have imagined, but his background cannot entirely offset the changes that come to him when he poses as a slave-owner. And Dana, in acting as a slave, becomes one. She persuades the slave woman Alice to go to Rufus's bed even though Alice hates him, and she continually forgives Rufus for his beatings and betrayals of her. She thinks, 'What had I done wrong? Why was I still slave to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me? Why had I taken yet another beating. And why . . . why was I so frightened now – frightened sick at the thought that sooner or later, I would have to run again?'<sup>16</sup> Her education, her knowledge of history, and her experiences in the twentieth century do not support or help her when she is faced with the actual conditions of slavery. The implication, echoing Du Bois, is that even for people who have put aside existing colour barriers in their own relationships and daily life, immersion in a racist system will recreate these barriers.

Racism in the past is dealt differently with Card's novel *Pastwatch*. Its characters come from many different ethnic backgrounds, and its plot is about an attempt to change history and Christopher Columbus's interactions with the native peoples that he encounters in the Caribbean and Americas. The novel begins in the twenty-third century with Tagiri, a woman who is 'as racially mixed as anyone else in the world these days',<sup>17</sup> observing her matrilineal African past through a device which allows people to watch events in past history. When she sees the child of one of the African women she watches captured and sold by an Arab slave-trader, she starts a project of watching the life of slaves throughout the world. Her research takes her to that of Hassan, who is watching the Carib and Arawak Indians in the

Caribbean prior to the arrival of the Spanish. When they watch together, they are seen by some of the people they watch and prayed to as gods to stop the enslavement.

Later research reveals that Christopher Columbus had intended to go on a crusade to stop the spread of Islam but was diverted instead to the search for the New World by the actions of other people from the future, a different future than Tagiri and Hassan's. A young Mexican man named Hunaphu Matamoro, engaging in the research of the pre-Columbian civilizations of South and Central America, realizes that this intervention, which led to slavery and colonialism in the Americas, occurred in order to prevent the conquest of Europe by the Tlaxcalans of Mesoamerica. Once Hunaphu has convinced others in the slavery project that the civilizations of the Americas were capable of this, he and two others, one being Diko, the daughter of Tagiri and Hassan and the other being Kemal Akyazi, a Turk who discovered the lost world of Atlantis, go into the past to perform another intervention, this time allowing Columbus to sail west but hoping to prevent the slavery and slaughter of the indigenous people by the multi-pronged approach of teaching Columbus to see non-whites as humans and stopping the Mesoamerican practice of human sacrifice.

Racial and ethnic issues are present throughout the novel, from Hunaphu's feeling of difference from his brothers because his father was Mayan when theirs was of Spanish descent to the representation of Muslims and Christians as still living in culturally different worlds. However, it is in the last portion of the novel, after Diko, Kemal and Hunaphu go back in time, that racial issues are most explicitly addressed. It is through the transformation of Columbus himself after Diko speaks with him on Haiti that Card does this. Columbus thinks,

Until I spoke with *her*, I didn't question the right of white men to give commands to brown ones. Only since she poisoned my mind with her strange interpretation of Christianity did I start seeing the way the Indians quietly resist being treated like slaves . . . Was it possible that God had brought him here, not to bring enlightenment to the heathen, but to learn it from them?<sup>18</sup>

The work that the black Diko does in speaking with the white Columbus allows him to begin seeing past colour differences, even past cultural differences, to an understanding that the Taino and other Caribbean tribes are as fully human as he is. The Spanish and the Taino begin to take on each other's language and customs. The intervention from the future strips Columbus of the assumptions and prejudices of his culture and upbringing, allowing him eventually to marry Diko and father a daughter who later becomes Queen



of the new nation of Caribia. Colonialism and slavery are superseded by an independent and powerful new world empire which is equally matched with the Europeans, and racism is revealed as an ideology which can be altered by the introduction of a different world-view.

Card's novel is not entirely uncomplicated: the repeal of human sacrifice comes about in part through the substitution of a kind of Christianity. Hunaphu and Diko both in their own ways practise the imposition of one culture upon another in the work they do to organize and unify the peoples of the region. The introduction of a modified Christianity in the formation of a new nation is presumably a better choice than the alternatives presented, the historical enslavement and colonization of the new world or the hypothetical conquest of Europe by practitioners of human sacrifice, but it is still a shaping of one culture by another and a judgement of technologically advanced people about how to manipulate another society. Diko and the others cannot be sure that their intervention will not have repercussions into a future similar to those which came after the intervention which sent Columbus west instead of east. However, since the people who decide to send Diko and the others back in time to intervene are the ones whose present will be wiped out if they succeed, it is an intervention motivated by sacrifice and concern for others rather than personal gain.

*Pastwatch* is more hopeful than *Kindred*, if only because it shows how black people can influence white people and prevent slavery, whereas *Kindred* shows how slavery as a system grinds down and dehumanizes the people within it. Butler uses time travel and history together as a way to highlight the fragility of twentieth-century racial tolerance, while Card uses them to emphasize how people of different racial backgrounds can work together. This is presumably due in part to differences in Card's and Butler's own lives; it is easier to be hopeful about an end to oppression if one is not part of an oppressed group.<sup>19</sup> Despite these differences, however, both novels find ways for the voices of disenfranchised and alienated people to be heard, Butler by giving voice to a black woman and Card by foregrounding racism and oppression rather than ignoring it. They prod the readers to examine both their past and their present to think about what kind of future they want.

Other recent sf novels revolve around racial and cultural identity issues, suggesting that the genre is moving towards an opening up of its past insularity, parallel to what happened with women writers in the 1970s. Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) recounts a Toronto where whites and middle- and upper-class people have abandoned the inner city to poverty, crime and a barter economy; the protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, uses African-Caribbean magic to fight the drug lord of the city. Kathleen Ann Goonan's *The Bones of*

*Time* (1996) draws on the beliefs and history of the Polynesian peoples who settled in Hawaii, and her characters come from the Asian-Hawaiian-white ethnic mix of the islands; her other novels about nanotechnology also include African-American and Caribbean characters. In *The Diamond Age* (1995), Neal Stephenson sets his future of nanotechnology in China and a world where people of all races and national origins have spread out across the globe into new tribes. Confucianism exists side by side with a neo-Victorian culture and an urban scenario of sophisticated weapons and lawlessness. Recent sf films and television shows have also been less homogeneously white; one episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* had the black Captain Sisko in an alternate world and personality where he wrote sf which he could not publish because no one believed that a black captain could exist.<sup>20</sup> Science fiction is a genre which is continually evolving, and as it encompasses a wider range of writers and readers it will reach a point where writing from or about a racial minority is neither subversive nor unusual but rather one of the traits which makes it a powerful literature of change.

NOTES

1. Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Warner, 1998), n.p.
2. Their essays are collected together in Sheree Thomas, ed., *Dark Matter* (New York: Warner, 2000).
3. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
4. Thomas, *Dark Matter*, p. xii
5. Mike Resnick, *A Miracle of Rare Design: A Tragedy of Transcendence* (New York: Tor, 1994), pp. 51–2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
9. W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Comet' (1920), reprinted in Thomas, *Dark Matter* pp. 5–18, at p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
11. Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), pp. 118, 117.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 129.
14. Robert A. Heinlein, *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) (New York: Signet, 1965), p. 208.
15. Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (1979) (Boston: Beacon, 1988), p. 100 (Butler's ellipsis).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
17. Orson Scott Card, *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Tor, 1996), p. 16.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

19. Although, as a Mormon, Card might comment that the Mormons have their own founding stories of oppression. A factor in Card's treatment of early America may be Mormon traditions that the indigenous peoples of America were descended from the lost ten tribes of Israel.
20. 'Far Beyond the Stars', episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*; teleplay: Ira Steven Behr and Hans Beimler; story: Marc Scott Zicree (UPN, 1998).

This collection considers the role of race and ethnicity in our visions of the future. The first section emphasizes the political elements of black identity portrayed in science fiction from black America to the vast reaches of interstellar space framed by racial history. In the next section, analysis of indigenous science fiction addresses the effects of colonization, helps discard the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovers ancestral traditions in order to adapt in a post-Native-apocalyptic world. Likewise, this section explores the affinity between science fiction