

## 黒ん坊は夢を見ない

—SF における人種、人種主義と問われている黒人の想像力—

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### **Darkies Never Dream: Race, Racism, and the Black Imagination in Science Fiction**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the putative lack of black engagement with science fiction (SF) as readers and writers. It argues that although blacks have been writing and reading science fiction since the genre's inception, this has generally not been recognized due in part to perdurable stereotypes of blacks as lacking sufficient imaginative power to enjoy SF as readers or to produce it as writers, as well as to stereotypes from both within and outside of the genre that characterize it as an intellectually challenging but puerile escapism unsuited to blacks who must preoccupy themselves with the daily realities of real-world oppression. Although black readers and writers of SF remain numerically small, I argue that black engagement with the genre has been marked not by absence but by invisibility, that is, by a failure of both those within and outside of it to perceive its presence.

*Darkies never dream. They must laugh and sing all day  
Can't forget your troubles when you're thinking what they are*

Song lyric from the 1934 film *Bubbling Over*<sup>1</sup>

*In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation  
than reflection.*

Thomas Jefferson<sup>2</sup>

*White men have imagination, Negroes have little, animals have none.*

Edgar Rice Burroughs<sup>3</sup>

*Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and  
whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for  
legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?*

Mark Dery<sup>4</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Once the proverbial nildoror<sup>5</sup> in the room, race now looms large as an object of critical discussion and interrogation within both the genre at large and academe. Often presented as a subtext of and for the allegorical exploration of alterity/alienation, race and racialist thinking infuse science fiction in both its literary and cinematic manifestations. However, nowhere is this more evident than in the discourse of blacks and science fiction, not only with regard to their depiction in genre works but also with regard to their positioning as consumers and producers of them.

This paper examines the latter, with particular focus on the discourse of black science fiction readership, or more precisely the purported lack thereof. Indeed, although the number of blacks active in science fiction as writers has continued to increase since the 1990s, their absence from the genre was often attributed to an overstated indifference if not aversion to science fiction. While it is true that the number of black readers and writers of SF remain proportionately small compared with the number of whites, I argue that black engagement with the genre has been marked less

by absence than by *invisibility*, that is, by a failure framed by popular prejudices, stereotypes, and social expectations embraced by both those within the genre and outside it to perceive that presence. Moreover, I argue that this apparent absence of blacks from the genre has been employed to reify socially entrenched notions that portray blacks as lacking the mental agility to engage in visionary speculation or so encumbered by the oppressive realities of everyday racism that their imaginative abilities have been impaired, a view that has prevented those who subscribe to it from examining the actual intersections between blacks and the genre – however peripheral that presence in the genre may at first appear.

To this end, the relocation of blacks from the margins of science fiction entails more than an analysis of how blacks and blackness have been imagined within the genre's borders. It must also interrogate perceptions of the black imagination itself, particularly how it has been portrayed in writings and public discourse from within and outside the genre about the relationship of blacks to the genre as both producers and consumers, the alleged writing and reading habits of blacks serving as the focus of much armchair speculation. One of the earliest speculations on the issue occurred in 1974 when Theodore Sturgeon, writing in *Galaxy* magazine, wondered why there were so few science fiction writers and surmised that “the average black, especially the ghetto black, is far too concerned with reality than to try to escape it,” a view he would reiterate in a 1976 interview in *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction*.<sup>6</sup> According to Kali Tal, Sturgeon raised the issue again in a graduate writing workshop she attended in 1977, during which Sturgeon asked his students to write a science fiction story explaining the phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Like Sturgeon, Tal, at the time a “precocious white sixteen-year old,” and her white classmates “all wrote stories about how the day-to-day struggle for survival left black folks no time or energy to construct fantasies,”<sup>8</sup> an explanation that Tal has conceded is incorrect.<sup>9</sup>

On the other side of the colorline, black SF author and aficionado Charles Saunders in his 1977 essay “Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction” offered his own answer to Sturgeon, arguing that it was less the daily pressures of American racial oppression that prevented blacks from reading (and writing) SF than the realization that the genre's own racist, albocentric narratives alienated blacks and offered them little of interest, let alone failing to provide them with a viable vehicle of escape – the genre's purported *raison d'être* – from the relentless reality of racism.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it is significant that Saunders himself continued to read and write SF – a decision, as we shall see, by no means unique to the author. Indeed, despite or because of the genre's

flaws, Saunders would return to the issue two decades later, this time to spell out the reasons why “blacks *should* read science fiction.”<sup>11</sup>

## I. READING IN THE MARGINS

The question of black SF readership and its phrasing highlight some of the unexamined premises about blacks, the genre and the society at large, for implicit in it is the assumption, codified in Anglo-American culture, that there is something intrinsically and peculiarly deficient about the imaginative, intellectual, and creative abilities of black people. Curiously, and perhaps tellingly, underrepresentation in the genre of Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans or other racio-ethnic minorities, has not generated similar rhetorical inquires or exhortatory turns.<sup>12</sup> Why, one might ask, are the reading habits of one particular minority problematized and not those of others?

Gregory E. Rutledge cites several factors to explain the lack of black science fiction readers, among them: 1) the genre’s penchant for presenting roseate futures in which race and ethnicity are no longer relevant; 2) the circumscribed nature of African American involvement in the arts; 3) marketing concerns that euro-americans would not be interested in reading about black characters; 4) black antagonism toward the pernicious (and still immensely extant) science fiction of scientific racism, or Rutledge aptly puts it, “the history of fiction masquerading in the guise of science”; and 5) different attitudes toward science, objectivity, and rationality arising from “different modes of cultural practice and belief not amenable to a logical hermeneutic” between Western and diasporic Africans and other non-westerners.<sup>13</sup>

Eric Lief Davin argues that black absence from the genre is due neither to any putative deeply ingrained racism in its depiction of blacks nor to its treatment of them as writers and fans, maintaining that rather than being “a monolithic field of racism and exclusion”<sup>14</sup> SF has traditionally been more open to blacks (and women) than American society at large and accusations of racism and sexism leveled at it are exaggerated and misplaced. He notes, for example, that the black presence in science fiction, albeit small, was there from “the very beginning,”<sup>15</sup> pointing out that the president of New York’s Scienceers, the first science fiction fan club formed in 1930, was a black Harlem resident.<sup>16</sup> He also takes umbrage at assertions made decades later by Samuel R. Delany<sup>17</sup> and Octavia Butler<sup>18</sup> that they had encountered racist editors, particularly Delany’s statement that famed *Astounding* (later *Analog*) editor John W. Campbell

rejected his novel *Nova* because he felt the magazine's white readership would not accept a black protagonist.<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, in his defense of SF against accusations of racism, Davin intriguingly presents anecdotal evidence from as early as the mid-1950s that refutes the notion of black uninterested in the genre, and that suggests they have shown a greater interest in SF than is commonly assumed. For example, he writes that in 1955 Campbell actually boasted of how his magazine had "sales peaks near . . . the Negro districts of large cities"<sup>20</sup> and quotes a San Francisco Bay newsstand distributor who states that in the 1960s science fiction magazines sold well in predominately black neighborhoods in north Oakland, including a "drugstore right around the corner from the north Oakland headquarters of the Black Panther Party [that] regularly sold *Analog*."<sup>21</sup> In the end, however, Davin's rebuttal comes off as a kind of "some-of-my-best-SF-readers-are-black" defense of Campbell and the genre as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

If indeed racism is not a major factor in black absence, then what is? Davin maintains that the absence of blacks from SF owes less to any systemic institutionalized racism than to black self-segregation. It is, he argues, not that racist whites have actively barred entrance to the club but that blacks have decided not to join. Davin attributes the lack of black interest in SF to their general lack of interest in other cultural activities that have traditionally drawn few black patrons – "attendance at art films, art galleries, natural history museums, operas, symphonies, chamber music concerts, ballet, and plays" – and argues that "black adults perceive [these] cultural activities . . . as 'white activities' and so avoid participating in them because that would be 'acting white,'"<sup>23</sup> though, ironically, if, as Campbell and others anecdotally cited by Davin maintain, SF has historically had a sizeable if largely unacknowledged black readership, this would suggest that reading SF was one cultural activity in which blacks did in fact partake.

Davin's dueling multitudinous Whitmanesque contradictions aside, his contention that SF has traditionally been perceived as a "white genre" is not denied, for in reality the genre remains predominantly white on both the production and consumption side despite advances by people of color into its ranks. The question, however, is whether and to what extent this perception of the genre as white and the notion that blacks are concerned about being perceived and negatively sanctioned within their own community for "acting white" have actually dissuaded blacks from engaging with the genre.

Moreover, despite Davin's assertion that the genre has not proven itself overtly hostile to blacks, it has shown itself, as Saunders and others maintain, generally indifferent to presenting the black experience, unless that experience is defined within the context of racism – not as part of a universal human experience. Octavia Butler has claimed that she was once told by an editor at a SF convention that writers should avoid introducing black characters unless the story is specifically about racism since their presence would otherwise “change the character of the stories,”<sup>24</sup> the so-called one-drop rule apparently applying to fiction as well as to “bloodlines.” The editor then went on to recommend that writers instead use aliens to sanitize the issue of racism by, in her words, “get[ting] rid of this messiness and *all those people we don't want to deal with*,”<sup>25</sup> offering a kind of literary if not quite literal Final Solution as an anodyne. Indeed, in 1986, almost a decade and a half before Sheree Thomas's groundbreaking first *Dark Matter* (2000) anthology of black speculative fiction, Butler had been editing an anthology “of science fiction of and by blacks,” but she lamented that “no one [publishers] would buy it,” telling her interviewer, “Most of the stories we got were about racism, as if that were the sum total of our lives. Especially, and I hate to say it, all the stories we got from white people [who apparently were also invited to contribute to the volume] were about racism because that was all they apparently thought we dealt with.”<sup>26</sup>

As the mounting critique of albescence, or whitewashing – the textual and visual replacement/displacement of nonwhites with/by white characters – suggests, the question of race and racism in science fiction has shifted from black reading habits toward problematizing the authorial decisions and macro/micro-aggressive editorial assumptions and policies that have served to alienate blacks from the genre.<sup>27</sup> That is, the problem is not that black readers have been uninterested in SF but that white genre writers and their editors have displayed little interest in them precisely because they presume *a priori* that blacks are not interested and because racist assumptions have long coded the genre as essentially for, by, and about super-intelligent, heterosexual white males, assumptions that themselves reiterate the prevailing discourse of black intellectual and imaginative deficiency embedded in the society at large. As Delany has put it, “[T]he imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs – signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, ‘Boys Club! Girls keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!’”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Saunders has described the Golden Age of SF as an age where “science was a king whose court was closed to

blacks.”<sup>29</sup> It is this perception of the mutual exclusivity of black lives and science fiction (albeit perhaps mired less in Burroughs’ posited black imaginative deficit than in the belief – no less condescendingly egregious – that black people “were too busy surviving in the here and now to write science fiction”<sup>30</sup>) which has served to prevent many from regarding, reading, and marketing works of black speculative fiction as precisely that: speculative.<sup>31</sup>

This assumption is evident in the fifth factor cited by Rutledge that posits a polarity between rational, objectivist, scientific-minded whites and blacks, whom it imagines as pre-rational Levy-Bruhlian if not Levi-Straussian mental savages. In this coded discourse, science fiction – like science itself – is presented as essentially a White Man’s Opus, an arena of and for intellectual activity/mastery reserved for those with the “right (read white) stuff.” Such reductionist speculations about the imaginative capacity of blacks have a long history in western popular and intellectual discourse that stretches from the seventeenth century to the present. The roster of Enlightenment thinkers, including the American president whose epigraph opens this paper, positing an unbreachable chasm between scientific, rational whites and intellectually deficient blacks is too long to list here. Traces of such thinking provided (and, sadly, continue to provide) the intellectual infrastructure for social and educational policies premised on the proposition that blacks either lack the acuity necessary to partake of imaginative life or that such skills would not serve them well in a society that neither desires nor rewards blacks who somehow manage to demonstrate such abilities, a view expressed by at least one prominent SF writer and editorialist. In 1963, anticipating scientific racists Arthur R. Jensen and William B Shockley, Campbell wrote in an *Analog* editorial in defense of racial segregation:

There is a never rigorously proven assumption that’s thrown around in all racial arguments that all races show the *same* distribution curve of intelligence and ability. *That has not been proven.*<sup>32</sup>

He continued, concluding on note uncannily echoing Burroughs’ pronouncement on the black imagination:

Now if all races have the same distribution curve, then knowing the population of the group, we can predict how many super-high geniuses will appear.

Something seems to be wrong; some gears slipped somewhere. The assumptions don't match the facts. The Caucasian race has produced super-high geniuses by the dozens in the last five thousand years; the Oriental race has, also. The Negro race has not.<sup>33</sup>

Such racist views, of course, extend beyond Davin's ostensibly racially "egalitarian"<sup>34</sup> SF community into the bedrock of America's racial consciousness and its perennial and largely reiterative national conversations on race. Writing in his autobiography, Malcolm X recalls an incident when as a youngster he had been urged by a white teacher to be "realistic" and encouraged to pursue carpentry as an occupation instead of law as a career.<sup>35</sup> Decades later, the legacy of such thinking reverberates in the post-Jensenist writings on IQ and race of *The Bell Curve* (1994) authors Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray and former Pioneer Fund president and scientific racist J. Philippe Ruston, as well as the contemporary popular discourse of blacks that continues to conceptualize them as innate super-athletes, natural entertainers, instinctual musicians, violent, eminently expendable, shoot-on-sight "thugs," and dick-dragging rapists/sex-machines, and encourages and expects blacks to work with their hands (or bodies) not with their minds to attain the ever-elusive American Dream and to embrace an internalized racial self-image grounded in physical not intellectual prowess.

Tellingly, these expectations are the mirror reflection of those surrounding science fiction fandom, which boast of the Mensa-level IQs of its members but who are stereotyped by genre outsiders as socially inept, psychologically arrested but otherwise harmless adolescent "geeks," stereotypes seldom ascribed to blacks, who are instead perceived as a permanent, threatening underclass of, quite literally, arrested adolescents (and adults). Moreover, the proposition that blacks are less inclined to read SF because their dreams are somehow more anchored to "reality" or deferred by the pragmatism required to navigate the racist topography of everyday life fails to explain why blacks, nonetheless, enjoy such fanciful escapes as reading comic books, playing video games, and watching science fiction movies – comparably inexpensive cultural activities not covered by Davin – or why, as many commentators on Afrofuturism have pointed out, SF themes regularly find their way into popular African American music and popular culture.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, even if the "different-codes-of-cultural belief-and-practice" theory to explain the lack of black representation in SF were valid, it still fails to explain why blacks have also been underrepresented in fantasy, a genre whose magical, ostensibly



“irrationalist engagements”<sup>37</sup> should appeal more to their putatively religious, pre-logical/mystical mentality.

A more fruitful approach to the question of blacks and science fiction requires a critical unpacking of the baggage of cultural beliefs that (pre)determine that certain questions about racial difference get asked while others do not. These selective inquiries do not stop at black reading habits; modern – and postmodern – scientific racists continue to problematize blacks, reifying black alterity as they urgently seek explanations for some putatively meaningful divergence from an invisible, normalized whiteness. For example, the question of black athletic ability continues to be broached,<sup>38</sup> as some scientists persist in their quixotic quest for the “gene(s),” “fast-twitch muscle fibers,” and other biogenetic MacGuffins responsible for producing black Olympians, though, curiously, the question of a genetic/fibromuscular basis for, say, pre-WWII Finnish domination of long-distance running (anyone remember those “Flying Finns”?) and, later, international motor rally sports or even, to cite a nonwhite example, Chinese domination of table tennis goes unasked, research to uncover their causes unfunded. Moreover, while the question of black reading habits has been problematized for over forty years, another question – Why don’t whites read science fiction and fantasy fiction with blacks on the cover? or, perhaps more accurately, why do publishers presume they won’t? – is more recent. By answering the latter, we may discern an answer to the former.

## II. READING MATTERS

Given the historic paucity of relatable black characters in SF, black readers have had by necessity to defend their choice of reading matter, the form of intellectual escapism SF provides being regarded by both those within their communities and by society at large as a luxury (privilege?) only whites could afford. As we have seen, this discourse portrays blacks as being too caught up in the daily struggle for survival to engage in its bourgeois flights of fancy. Today, however, the proliferation of special conferences on blacks and science fiction and discussions of science fiction in black social media have served to undermine the myth of black uninterest in SF. In its place have emerged previous hidden, ignored and unspoken counter-narratives that testify to the fact that despite the genre’s racial insularity and the disregard with which it has traditionally been held within the black community, blacks have, nonetheless, continued to invest

imaginatively, creatively and emotionally in SF as both readers and writers, if perhaps less often as convention-attending fans. Writes blogger Alicia McCalla in her intentionally ironically blog “Black People Don’t Read Science Fiction”:

Since I was an avid reader, I took to writing early. I loved writing my strange stories. Whenever I would share my stories, I would get the look. One teacher even put her hand on my shoulder and said, “Honey, why don’t you write a normal story. Nobody really wants to read all of that weird stuff.” So I did what we all do, I hid my love for Sci-Fi. I took to reading and writing it in secret. When the Sci-Fi channel came on [in 1992], I would watch the shows in private. My own special moments...

Until, one day I said “to hell with all those people.” I just grew-up. I stood up to everyone and proclaimed my love for the weird, unusual, paranormal, outlandish, and strange.

“I love sci-fi and I’m not gonna take it any more!”<sup>39</sup>

Isiah Lavender writes, “As long as I can remember science fiction (SF) and race have been tangled together in my thoughts,”<sup>40</sup> recalling that his earliest memory at the age of three being was carried into his home by his father after falling asleep during a scene from *Star Wars* in 1977. He also recalls his mother’s love of SF and *Omni* magazine and viewing *Blade Runner* with her in 1982, during which he was exposed to the word nigger (in the opening expository scroll that informs viewers that the titular renegade replicant hunter’s “skin-job”-hating boss “was the kind of cop who used to call black men niggers”) for the first time without then knowing what it meant, only to find out a year later when he is called the epithet.<sup>41</sup>

Again, although Saunders would write in “Why Blacks Should Read Science Fiction” that his earlier criticism of the genre in “Why Blacks Don’t Read Science Fiction” arose in part from his belief that “most blacks shunned SF and fantasy because there was little for us to identify with in the content. And what there was tended (with, of course, some exceptions) to conform to negative stereotypes of blacks endemic in other genres,”<sup>42</sup> it is significant that these complaints did not prevent him from continuing to read and presumably enjoy SF, at least those works that defied convention. Moreover, it is doubtful that Saunders’s engagement with the genre was as exceptional as the totalizing title of his original essay implies. Indeed, while my own

limited experience with fandom in the 1970s and early 1980s confirms the observation that blacks did constitute a minor presence at SF conventions at the time (at least, those that I attended in Manhattan), it remains to be seen whether: 1) the genre is ultimately as off-putting to blacks as has generally been assumed, 2) low black convention attendance is necessarily indicative of a lack of interest in literary and cinematic SF, and 3) the perceived exclusiveness of the genre and social disapproval within the black community dissuades blacks from reading it, as opposed to inhibiting, as McCalla's comments suggests, *public* demonstrations of interest. Indeed, while the last twenty years or so have seen an increase of blacks on the production side, particularly black women writers, the question of whether black consumption of literary SF has ever been as stark as it has generally been portrayed remains.

### III. LOOKING FOR THE INVISIBLE

The personal narratives of McCalla, Lavender, and Saunders do not read like those of a people particularly averse to SF and should prompt a critical reconsideration of whether the putative black aversion to and/or uninterest in SF is all that it is made out to be. Instead of positing reasons for black absence, it may prove more productive to the deconstruction of racial mythologies to examine the processes by which blacks actually come to engage the genre despite the barriers – intentional or not, perceived or real – to participation imposed by the genre itself, by larger societal attitudes, and by both. The fact is that despite its “whites only” codes, black readers come to (infiltrate?) the genre by many routes, defying and actively resisting social expectations from whites that they are ill-equipped intellectually to deal with its content or from fellow blacks who feel their needs are not served by its perceived irrelevance to narrowly defined black lives. Here, I would like briefly to trace my own engagement, one that I do not think is particularly unique.

Growing up in Harlem in the 1960s, my attraction to the genre arose from a preadolescent interest in astronomy and biology. I had checked out books on these subjects by Isaac Asimov from the Countee Cullen Library, eventually learning that Asimov also wrote something called “science fiction” and that the library housed an entire corner, a collection which, for a library serving Harlem, belied the stereotype that blacks lack interest in the genre. Having exhausted most of that collection, I subsequently went on to search for science fiction on the bookracks of neighborhood

drugstores and candy shops (where one could, indeed, occasionally find a title by Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein), saving up my weekly allowance for treks downtown to Barnes and Noble, where I fell under the surreptitious gaze of ever vigilant white store clerks who seemed as preoccupied with monitoring my movements as I was with checking out the store's latest inventory.

As a reader, I felt more comfortable in the imaginary worlds of SF than the "realistic" worlds presented in the English literature classes taught at my Catholic elementary school and assigned for summer reading, though blacks were seldom featured in either. In fact, this may have been the initial attraction of SF for me, for contrary to the notion that black indifference to SF arises from a kind of anoneiric pragmatism, I *wanted* to escape to worlds where race was irrelevant; for relevance there was James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Anne Moody, Claude Brown, Margaret Walker, and Ralph Ellison (though before the arrival of a radical young white nun during seventh grade, none of these writers was part of the curriculum, and like SF they had to be discovered on one's own, beyond the narrow, well-guarded gates of primary school canon). The general absence of black characters from both the genre's literary and cinematic manifestations was oddly comforting, since their absence also meant the absence of black stereotypes. Indeed, the fact that the 1950s SF films I watched on television were often set in small Rockwellian towns or in government laboratories staffed by comfortably middle-class Hugh Marlow/Richard Carlson/Richard Denning types and did not center on the intrigues of wealthy, urban whites meant there would be few if any scenes showcasing the requisite comic relief black chauffeurs and busboys that were a fixture of other Hollywood films.

As time passed, my perspective grew more critical, such respites proving fleeting with the realization that not only were black stereotypes as much a part of SF as they were the fabric of American popular culture in general but also that "the future" did not include those who looked like me and shared my experiences. I began to seek out representations of blacks (and other people of color) in genre works, to make mental notes when they appeared, to gauge their "accuracy," and to read more discerningly those writers in whose works blacks did appear: Bobby Daniels, the "little black kid" who lived down the street in Philip K. Dick's "The Father-Thing" (1954) and the nomadic dark-skinned Bleekmen of his *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), the diasporic Negro Martians of Ray Bradbury's "The Other Foot," the technologically advanced, ebony-skinned, alien Overlords and Jan Rodricks, the black last man of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), and the racially ambiguous titular *Homo superior*

mutant of Olaf Stapleton's *Odd John* (1935) and his black fellow mutants, the Africans Ng-Gunko and the unfortunately named infant Sambo, offering tinges of tincture in an otherwise pallid landscape.

The same applied to SF illustration: The elegant black faces by artists Leo and Diane Dillon and the stoic, enigmatic portraits of Brad Holland that began to grace the covers of SF paperbacks and Science Fiction Book Club editions in the 1970s contributed greatly to sustaining my interest in the genre. The assumption, not always borne out, that book covers depicting black people would also recognize them in the pages between invited further excursions into the genre and the discovery of other authors, some of whom did indeed write about black characters and explore black themes.

Once begun, the quest for black genre representation invites new questions. Black characters and cover illustrations were one thing, but where were the black genre writers? Certainly they had to exist, too.<sup>43</sup> This question invites a new journey that involves, as Sheree Thomas (2000) aptly puts it, "looking for the invisible,"<sup>44</sup> a journey on which I and, I believe, many black SF readers, past and present, embark, though in the days before the emergence of the internet's readily accessible archival inventory, one that did not lead to particularly easy answers. I still remember my delight in 1971 upon receiving my copy of the hardback Nelson Doubleday Science Fiction Book Club edition of Samuel R. Delany's *Driftglass* (1971), the back dust cover of which featured a black and white photograph of the author in semi-profile (looking not unlike a young Lenny Kravitz), presenting the tantalizing possibility that black science fiction authors did indeed exist, for not only did Delany appear to be black, the text beneath the photo stating that he "grew up in New York's Harlem" was more than a little suggestive. For most science fiction readers outside of SF fandom, the clues remained just that. In fact, as late as 1978, Saunders could write: "It would be interesting to learn how many science fiction readers know that Delany is black. It would also be interesting to know the extent to which Delany is known in the black community."<sup>45</sup>

My guess would be at the time not many, although he is now celebrated as "the first African American science fiction writer" and "Father of Black FFF [Futurist Fiction Fantasy] literature and criticism,"<sup>46</sup> labels with which Delany himself has expressed some unease.<sup>47</sup> Prior to the publication of the Bantam Books paperback *Heavenly Breakfast* (1978) – with its full-color, full-face portrait of Delany on its cover – and Peplow and Bavard's *Samuel R. Delany: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (1980) – in which I additionally learned that the funeral parlor a few

blocks from my childhood home had been operated by Delany's father<sup>48</sup> – Delany's race, as well as his sexuality, was a matter of conjecture for those on the margins of fandom. Moreover, although black characters had appeared in Delany's fiction (*The Einstein Intersection*, 1967, *Nova*, 1968), direct engagements with racial themes, like gay themes, would not enter his fiction until the mid-70s with the publication of *Dhalgren* (1975), *Triton* (1976), and the "Nevèryon" series (1979-1987).

#### IV. CONCLUSION: REACHING FOR A STAR

Can, as Dery asks in his epigraph to this paper, a community whose past has been erased imagine the future? The answer of course is yes. As Dery's own initial musings on the subject have shown, it has and will continue to do so as it simultaneously strives to ensure that the legacy of its own past, present, and future speculative imaginings is preserved and escapes erasure, expanding its inquiries to include recognition of speculative forays beyond the genre's own increasing porous boundaries. For while historically genre SF has been bereft of black writers, the void has been filled by non-genre black writers writing speculatively outside the genre. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of works have examined the contributions of black writers to science fiction and, more broadly, speculative literature.<sup>49</sup> Significantly, these studies reveal that historically blacks have been and continue to be interested in science fiction, though significantly their output was seldom labeled or marketed as such. In fact, traditionally the bulk of black speculative production has taken place outside of the genre, where it has primarily been produced, marketed, and consumed as African American or black literature. The reasons for this involve the liminal status of both blacks and SF within larger relational hierarchies of racial and literary expectation and "respectability," a topic that exceeds the scope of this paper. However, as we have seen, one reason for the dearth of blacks in the genre rests in the perception of SF as a puerile form of escapism divorced from the harsh realities of the black experience: for a "serious" black writer to produce speculative works within a genre portrayed in popular discourse as mired in prepubescent male fantasies of rayguns, rocketships, renegade robots, and rapacious bugged-eyed aliens – with, judging by the covers of its monthly magazines, a salacious penchant for scantily clad white women – would be perceived as a frivolous and embarrassing retreat from hard-earned literary acceptability. On the other hand, we have also seen that SF and blacks have long been perceived as

incompatible, oxymoronic, an unviable, cognitively dissonant chimera. Writes Jeffrey Allen Tucker:

An uncle, inquiring as to the nature of my graduate research asked me, “So just what are you doing up there at Princeton? When I explained that I was writing on the first major African American SF writer, my uncle replied, “Oh no, we (meaning African Americans) don’t do that. We leave that stuff (SF) for white folks.” I had no idea as to how to reply and let the matter drop, but his words indicated that for many people – black as well as white – science fiction and African American culture are mutually exclusive.<sup>50</sup>

Exploring the issues of race and blacks in science fiction involves not only archiving extrapolations on the theme of race and the black experience in fiction but also unpacking heretofore unexamined assumptions about the experiences of blacks as both readers and writers, consumers and producers within a literary tradition that for far too long has failed to apprehend the black presence in its midst. This largely elided archive of black speculative, productive, and consumptive practice is just beginning to be recognized as black genre aficionados come out of the closet and proclaim their interest in it, and as African American and other scholars re-examine previously ignored intersections between blacks and SF.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, the question that we are left with is not why don’t blacks read science fiction – for, as we have seen, they do – but, why given the genre’s questionable record of black representation and the nature of its past and present inquiries into race do they continue to read (and write) it? The fact that they apparently do not read it in numbers proportionate to whites is neither indicative of the genre’s “inherent” racism nor of black pragmatism; neither of these answers has proven convincing. What is lacking are hard data on the actual reading habits of blacks (and other people of color, too). The discourse often assumes that the low attendance of blacks at SF conventions is indicative of black lack of interest in the genre, but it is more likely that socioeconomic factors and other considerations – not the least of which negative public perception of the genre as, variously, “white,” “geeky,” “nerdy,” and “brainy” (labels that, it should be noted, have also dissuaded not a few *whites* from venturing into the genre and sampling its wares) – have prevented or dissuaded blacks from public engagement with it and prompted them to consume SF furtively beyond censorious or disbelieving public scrutiny, whether from whites or from within the black community itself.

The expansion of the internet, YouTube, social media, online and DIY publishing, as well as an increased awareness of and demand for diversity fueled by these developments among traditional publishers have contributed to the erosion of such perceptions. For example, SF publishers such as Tor Books and Fireside Fiction have publically expressed an openness to “represent the full diversity of speculative fiction, and encourage submissions by writers from under-represented populations.”<sup>52</sup> Recognizing the socioeconomic barriers to black participation in fandom, fan-initiated projects such as Con or Bust provide financial assistance to fans of color to attend science fiction and fantasy conventions in order to “increase racial and ethnic diversity in the production of and audience for speculative fiction.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, as the mainstreaming of SF, the slipstreaming of mainstream literature, and the erosion of the social stigma attached to SF in the white community have resulted in a more positive reappraisal of “geekdom,” the reluctance of blacks to admit publically to enjoying SF has also begun to wane, with more and more blacks appropriating the term “nerd,” proudly proclaim themselves “blerds” (black nerds), and celebrating their newly vocalized identity and its culture on the internet and in other public forums, thereby putting to rest the myth of the incompatibility of blackness with speculative practice.<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, the increased visibility of blacks in the genre may, according to some, generate a backlash. In 1998, a prescient Delany wrote:

As long as there are only one, two, or a handful of us, however, I presume in a field such as science fiction, where many of its writers come out of the liberal-Jewish tradition, prejudice will most likely remain a slight force – until, say, black writers start to number thirteen, fifteen, twenty percent of the total. At that point, where the competition might be perceived as having some economic heft, chances are we will have as much racism and prejudice here as in any other field. We are still a long way away from such statistics. But we are certainly moving closer.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps precipitously close. Citing Delany’s prediction, Alaya Dawn Johnson anticipates that “chances are we will have as much racism and prejudice here as in any other field.”<sup>56</sup>

Nearly 20 years later, that prejudice abounds: Whitewashed covers, hostile dismissals of “identity politics” and “political correctness” as a barely veiled attempt to silence us, all-white panels on diversity,



all-white anthologies of “the best” science fiction and continual institutional barriers to traditional publication based on appeals to marketability that really reflect the publishing houses’ disbelief in the power and appeal of black storytelling.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, since 2012, in reaction to these new voices – black, female, gay, and transgender – science fiction has come, quite literally, to face its dog days, with reactionary self-avowed “Puppies,” their moderate “Sad” and more militant “Rabid” factions uniting to wage campaigns against what they perceive as “politically correct,” diversity-mongering works in an attempt to drag the genre back to its pristine, heteronormative eurocentric roots, its most recent bid being an unsuccessful attempt to rig 2015 Hugo award ballots to favor conservative, nativist writers who “bristle at the assertions . . . they are “racist, sexist, homophobes.”<sup>58</sup> Moreover, despite advances made by writers of color in the genre, black writers of science fiction continue to confront “structural, institutional, personal, universal racism”<sup>59</sup> a 2015 study concluded, noting that of 2,039 original SF stories published in 2015, only 38 (1.96%) were by black writers.<sup>60</sup>

When it comes to the imagining of race, despite its quantum imagination, SF as both a literature of the possible and a community that intellectually embraces those possibilities, still functions on the level of Newtonian physics where every progressive action forward is followed by an equal and opposite reaction backward. For just as technological advances in social media and self-publishing have enabled new voices, they have also provided a platform for voices of reactionary resistance to counter those that were once silent but that have emerged to bear witness to presence.

As scholarship about blacks and science fiction develops, it should include not only critical (re)readings of SF texts that examine their treatment of race, blacks, and blackness but also collect, archive, and ethnographically explore the social experiences and oral histories of black writers, readers, artists, and fans, document the impact of black diasporic consciousness(es) and liberation movements in the development of the New Wave and other social and literary rebellions within the genre and *vice-a-versa*, including those opposed to the transformations taking place within its borders, and render visible a presence that has for all too long been viewed, when it has been viewed at all, as problematic, peripheral, and negligible.

## NOTES

This article is dedicated to the late Paul Williams.

1. *Bubbling Over*.
2. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.
3. Quoted in Barnes, "Author's Note": 264.
4. Quoted in Dery, "Black to the Future": 180.
5. The sentient elephant-like inhabitants of the planet Belzagor, a former Earth colony and surrogate postcolonial Africa in *Downward to the Earth* (1970), Robert Silverberg's tribute to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).
6. Ashley, *Gateway to Forever*: 9.
7. Tal, "That Just Kills Me."
8. *Ibid.*
9. Tal, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being." Here Tal gives the date of Sturgeon's workshop as 1976.
10. See Saunders, "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction."
11. See Saunders, "Why Black Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction." Significantly, some forty years later, a similar argument is presented by Nigerian American SF author American Nnedi Okorafor who has said that the genre's failure to address issues of concern to blacks "is a large part of why I started writing . . . because as a reader I wasn't seeing the stories I wanted to read, the characters I wanted to read, the dearth of diversity" (Quoted in Flood "Black Science Fiction Writers Face 'Universal' Racism").
12. The lack of representation of these groups as readers/writers of science fiction is seldom made an issue. While Asian themes and settings have come to dominate cyberpunk and, more recently, anime-influenced SF, ethnic Asian *American SF* writers and active fans are almost equally underrepresented.
13. Rutledge, "Futurist Fiction and Fantasy."
14. Eric Leif Davin, *Partners in Wonder*: 209.
15. *Ibid.*: 192.
16. *Ibid.*: 192-194.
17. Quoted in Samuel R. Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction": 1.
18. Quoted in Beal, "Interview with Octavia Butler": 18.
19. See Davin: 193-194, 199.
20. Davin: 195.
21. Davin: 210, fn. 7.

22. Both Davin and Ashley deny Campbell was racist. Defining racism as “bigotry based on non-rationalized emotion,” Ashley concludes that Campbell was not racist, despite giving “that impression because of his anglocentric views, his domination of any argument and his intransigence” and because “Campbell based all his conclusions on empirical evidence” (Ashley:9) – as, did, of course, generations of rationalist Enlightenment logical empiricists and modern positivist scientific racists. Despite these denials, evidence of Campbell’s intellectual racism is not wanting, as is clear from his *Analog* editorials (Campbell, *Collected Editorials*) on segregation (“Segregation,” 1963: 12-25), poverty (“Hyperinfracaniphilia,” 1965: 26-31), psychology (“Breakthrough in Psychology,” 1965:32-41), and colonialism (“Colonialism,” 1961:193-202). The charge is also supported by the reminiscences of Philip Klass (a.k.a. William Tenn), Barry Malzberg, and Michael Moorcock who have characterized some of Campbell’s beliefs, if not necessarily his personal conduct, as racist, with a particular anti-black bias. See DMZ and Solstein, “John W. Campbell’s Golden Age”: 28-30. Isaac Asimov’s views on Campbell’s racism are also recounted in Michael White, *Asimov: The Unauthorized Life*: 57. Also see Westfahl, “Dictatorial, Authoritarian Uncooperative.”

23. Davin: 198.

24. Quoted in Beal: 18.

25. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

26. *Ibid.*: 18.

27. For a discussion of whitewashing in science fiction, see Russell “Don’t # Make My Black Face Blue.”

28. Quoted in Dery: 180.

29. Saunders, “Why Blacks Should Read Science Fiction”: 399.

30. Tal, “That Just Kills Me.”

31. The term “speculative fiction” emerged in the 1970s as the preferred term among New Wave writers such as Norman Spinrad, Robert Silverberg, and Harlan Ellison who rejected the term “science fiction” and “sci-fi,” or “skiffy” as Ellison dismissively pronounced it (Ellison: 131), as ghettoizing marketing labels and strove to lead the genre toward greater literary respectability. Ironically, while SF remained a white man’s club, these young rebels described the genre as a “literary ghetto,” perhaps unremarkable given the prominence of Jewish writers in the genre, but who, significantly, often compared their status *vis-à-vis* the mainstream to that of black jazz musicians who had yet to gain acceptance among the cultural cognoscenti or who, once they had, were now damned with faint praise as operating on a “primitive,” “instinctual” level of creativity. They were quick to point out that both jazz and SF were decidedly American products that had failed to be properly appreciated by its cultural gatekeepers. See William Tenn, “Jazz Then, Musicology Now”: 107-110. The ghetto analogy and

identification with blacks was elaborated on by Spinrad, who dismissed writers (like Kurt Vonnegut and Daniel Keyes) who had left the genre's "ghetto walls" and found literary respectability as "token niggers" in the mainstream (Spinrad, *Science Fiction in the Real World*: 9).

32. Campbell: 18; original emphasis.

33. Campbell: 19.

34. Davin: 192-193.

35. See Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: 36.

36. Dery, who coined the term, defines Afrofuturism as "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery: 180). For a discussion of Afrofuturism and recurring SF motifs in African American popular culture, see his edited volume *Flame War and Womack's Afrofuturism*.

37. Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*: xvi-xvii.

38 See, for example, Entine.

39. McCalla, "Black People Don't Read Science Fiction."

40. Lavender, *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*: 3.

41. *Ibid.*: 3-4.

42. Saunders, "Why Blacks Should Read Science Fiction": 398.

43. As Delany reminds us, we have no way of knowing the racial background of many of the authors who wrote early pulp fiction (Delany: 1). We simply assume by default that they are white.

44. Thomas, "Introduction" to *Dark Matter*: ix.

45. Saunders, "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction": 163.

46. Rutledge: 243.

47. Delany, 1998: 1.

48. See Peplow and Bavard, *Samuel R. Delany*: 2.

49. See Thomas's *Dark Matter* and Lavender's *Race in American Science Fiction*, "Black Grit," and his edited volume, *Black and Brown Planets*.

50. Tucker.

51. See Jackson and Moody-Freeman, eds., *The Black Imagination*.

52. See Tor.com, "Submission Guidelines" and Barry J. White, "Fiction, We Have a Problem."

53. Con or Bust, 2015.

54. On black nerd culture, see Tervalon, "Black Nerd Culture," Toby, "The Rise of the Black Nerd," Steele, "21 Struggles," and the website Black Nerd Problems, Live Journal's Dead Browwalking forum is one of a number of forums devoted to providing an online community where people of color come to proclaim themselves fans of the genre and to discuss its impact on their lives. On YouTube, see Andre Meadows' blog *Andre the Black Nerd*, Omar Homan's

- slam poem, “10 Things I Want to Say to a Black Nerd (After Jennifer Falu)” and AntiHeroDrink’s passionate defense of black nerds “It’s A-OK to be a Black Geek.”
55. Delany: 16.
56. Johnson, “This Month (And Every Month), Black Sci-Fi Writers Look to the Future.”
57. *Ibid.*
58. Wallace, “Who Won Science Fiction’s Hugo Awards.”
59. White, “Fiction, We Have a Problem: It’s Racism.”
60. Kane, “Antiblack Racism in Speculative Fiction,” and Wiggins, “Speculative Antiblackness#BlackSpecFic.”

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