MOSF

# MOSF Journal of Science Fiction

## Managing Editor

A.D. Boynton II, ABD

## Deputy Editor

Barbara Jasny, Ph.D.

## Editors

Débora Madrid, Ph.D., Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, Ph.D., Tonie Marie Gordon, Ph.D., Zoha Kazemi, Sayan Chattopadhyay

## Editorial Board

Nancy Kress, M.A., M.S.; Charles E. Gannon, Ph.D.; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Ph.D.; Terence McSweeney, Ph.D.; & Marleen S. Barr, Ph.D.

## Cover Art

Amy Z

## Articles

"Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia"
By Craig Rustici, Ph.D.

"Unbounding the Black Imago: How Representation of Blackness in Superhero Fiction Propagates a Negative Model of Anti-Racist Practice"
By Adebayo Oluwayomi, Ph.D.

"Speculative Fiction and Parody:  Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*"
By Andrew Nyongesa, Ph.D.

## Book Reviews

*Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson*, edited by Isiah Lavender III
By Sandra Jacobo, M.A.

*Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival in Speculative Fiction*, edited by Ida Yoshinaga Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan
By Tiffany Fritz

*New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction*, edited by Lars Schmeink and Ingo Cornils
By Alexander Crayon, M.A.

## Sponsored by the Museum of Science Fiction
## & hosted by the University of Maryland Libraries

Museum of Science Fiction
PO Box 88
Alexandria, VA 22313

University of Maryland Libraries
7649 Library Lane
College Park, MD 20742

## Open Access Policy

This journal provides immediate open access to its content in keeping with the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

# Table of Contents

**Book Reviews**

# Letter from the Editor

The Museum of Science Fiction's *Journal of Science Fiction* (JOSF) was founded in 2016 by editor and science fiction writer Monica Louzon who said the journal's start "filled [her] with elation and trepidation;" I write with certainty that those energies accompany the Journal eight years later as we emerge from a year-long hiatus. As witnessed in many industries and with academic journals across the world, our editorial staff was seriously and negatively impacted by the coronavirus pandemic that started in 2020. In 2022, the editorial team chose to take a pause after the publication of our special issue on Young Adult Science Fiction. It is auspicious that we announce new beginnings and chart a new path in the same year Octavia Butler sets her Parable of the Sower, an apocalyptic novel whose central message reminds us that "the only lasting truth is change."

We embrace this change with a new editorial team. This past summer, I accepted the position as the new Managing Editor. As someone who has served on the Journal for five years, I look forward to leading an international and multidisciplinary team in our mission to bring cutting-edge, open access scholarship on science fiction to a wider audience. Barbara Jasny, molecular biologist and a long-time editor of the Journal, is now the Deputy Editor. Additionally, JOSF welcomes author of 13 novels, speculative fiction writer Zoha Kazemi; Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, scholar of horror fiction and Professor of English at Palomar College; Débora Madrid, scholar of science fiction cinema at Universidad de La Laguna; sociologist and health equity researcher, Tonie Marie Gordon; and Sayan Chattopadhyay, Doctoral Researcher and Faculty of English at Adamas University to the team as Editors as well as Amy Meade as our new layout editor. JOSF thanks Aisha Matthews for her tremendous service as Managing Editor for the Journal for over 4 years; we wish you continued success in all your endeavors.

The scholarship in this comeback issue focuses on science fiction that challenges dominant narratives in society, especially as it relates to citizenship and representation in society and popular culture. Craig Rustici, in his "Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia," explores Vonnegut's portrayals of disability in his 1961 short story "Harrison Bergeron". In "Unbounding the Black Imago: How Representation of Blackness in Superhero Fiction Propagates a Negative Model of Anti-Racist Practice" by Adebayo Oluwayomi addresses how negative stereotypes of Black people that can pervade in science fiction and then offers several Black comic book series, like the Brotherman series, as anti-racist counter-narratives. And lastly, Andrew Nyongesa, in "Speculative Fiction and Parody:  Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*," analyzes Farah's satirical and disruptive use of gender roles in a Somalia fraught with civil war. These articles demonstrate how science fiction is a key part of building

## **Letter from the Editor**, continued

our social and political worldviews and the directions scholarship on science and speculative fiction are taking.

This issue also holds three book reviews of recently published, edited collections: *Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson*, edited by Isiah Lavender III; *Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival in Speculative Fiction*, edited by Ida Yoshinaga Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan; and *New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction*, edited by Lars Schmeink and Ingo Cornils. These were written by junior scholars in the field: Sandra Jacobo, Tiffany Fritz, and Alexander Crayon, respectively. The Journal looks forward to publishing more reviews of this kind, as well as those on fiction, film, and other media in the future.

Not only are we celebrating our eighth year of publication, but this year holds extraordinary anniversaries in science fiction dealing with virtual reality as well. This year is the 40th anniversary of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the 25th of *The Matrix* film. To commemorate these works and their contribution to science fiction, the Journal will have a special issue devoted to "Virtual Reality and Cyberspace" to be published by the end of this year. In this issue, you will find our Call for Papers for the issue. Please share it far and wide and submit your work as well. We look forward to the possibility of publishing your work and future collaborations.

I will close this letter in gratitude: thank you, readers, for supporting this comeback issue of the MOSF *Journal of Science Fiction*. To the authors who submitted their works for consideration and the many editors who worked on this issue, some in the midst of the pandemic's darkest hours, we thank you for your dedication and insight. ∎

— A.D. Boynton II
Managing Editor
MOSF Journal of Science Fiction

## Cover Art



Cover art by Amy Z

# Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia

**Craig M. Rustici**

**Abstract:** In "Harrison Bergeron," Kurt Vonnegut portrays a dystopia that uses prostheses to impair rather than enhance or rehabilitate. The gifted experience oppressive, normalizing measures like those American society has frequently imposed upon the "defective."  Through references to "handicaps" as well as cognitive and communicative impairment, disability appears in "Harrison Bergeron" and makes visible the "rule of normalcy" that Lennard J. Davis has identified in bourgeois democracy. Such democracy required a concept of average, normal citizens represented by elected officials. As Davis explains, though, Francis Galton revised the bell curve to create a "statistical Ideal" that would promote extremes of desired traits. In Vonnegut's dystopia, Galton's intervention has not occurred, and mandatory prostheses force everyone to be normal, that is, average. The extraordinary rebel Harrison, however, offers not a liberatory movement but rather a counter-revolutionary return to feudalism. In different ways and for different reasons, Vonnegut and Davis warn against idealizing equality.

**Keywords:** Vonnegut, dystopia, normalcy, disability

In "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), Kurt Vonnegut portrays a future, dystopian society that uses prostheses not to rehabilitate or enhance but rather to impair: to disrupt thought, distort vision, and disfigure beauty. In Vonnegut's story, the gifted are subjected to oppressive, normalizing measures much like those American society has frequently imposed upon people presumed "defective." The imposed and sometimes innate disabilities portrayed in this dystopian narrative make "visible," to borrow Tobin Siebers's formulation, "dominant ideologies," specifically the "rule of normalcy" that Lennard J. Davis (1999) has identified in bourgeois representative democracy (Siebers, 2008, p. 14).

Vonnegut's story, which unfolds largely on the screen of Hazel and George Bergeron's television, is set in 2081, when the United States government has mandated not simply equal opportunity but rather equal ability, a mandate enforced by the Office of the Handicapper General. A news bulletin interrupts the mediocre dance performance the couple is watching and reports that their fourteen year-old son Harrison, who had been arrested by agents of the Handicapper-General, has escaped from jail. The news bulletin warns, "He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (2007b, p. 10). Moments later, Harrison breaks into the broadcast studio, declares

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

himself Emperor, invites one of the balle-rinas to be his Empress, and leads her in a dance. As Harrison and his consort kiss, suspended in air four inches below the studio ceiling, the Handicapper General enters the studio, shoots them dead, and thus ends Harrison's rebellion. For differ-ent reasons, each of Harrison's parents quickly forget what they have witnessed.

Disability appears perhaps most explicitly in Vonnegut's story not through artifi-cially handicapped characters such as Harrison but rather through the television announcer who, "like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment" and consequently after struggling for half a minute to read a special report about Harrison's jailbreak, hands "the bulletin to a ballerina to read" (2007b, p. 12). His impairment, unlike the artificial ones, such as vision-distorting eyeglasses, that predominate in the story, appears to be "natural." At least, in this case, Vonnegut mentions no prosthesis. Since the NIH reports that less than 5 percent of Ameri-cans have speech disorders, the announc-er's impairment also belies the story's convention that this twenty-first century dystopia has rendered all its citizens aver-age. Like the disarticulate characters that James Berger (2014) has analyzed, Von-negut's announcer, then, hints at a power to subvert the modern world's ambition "to define and control all phenomena," an ambition quite evident in the dystopia Vonnegut imagines (Berger, 2014, p. 8).

Disability also appears as Vonnegut repeatedly uses forms of the word "hand-icap," twenty-one times in a story of less than 2200 words. Vonnegut most explic-itly evokes the earlier meaning of the word, rooted in horseracing, to designate the added weight carried by faster horses to equalize slower horses' chances of winning. He evokes the racing metaphor as he reports, "In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds" (2007b, p. 11). The later meaning of "handicap" as "disability," though, was well- and widely-established when Vonnegut first published "Harrison Bergeron" in 1961. In the 1930s officials at the Emergency Relief Bureau of New York City stamped "PH" for physically handicapped on the applications of workers who were con-sequently denied WPA jobs, prompting activists to stage a sit-in at the ERB director's office and form the League of the Physically Handicapped (Fleischer 2012, p. 5). Later, the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped adopted the term and in 1945 successfully lobbied President Truman to establish an Employ the Physically Handicapped Week (Jen-nings 2016, p. 98). That initiative evolved in 1955 into the "President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Hand-icapped" (Eisenhower). The earlier and later meanings of "handicap" intersect as Harrison uses the vocabulary of somatic impairment to describe the impact of his artificial handicaps: "I stand here ... crippled ... sickened" (2007b, p. 12). To

## Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia, continued

render Harrison normal, Vonnegut's dystopian society disables him.

In his influential analysis, Lennard J. Davis contends that in the mid nineteenth century statistics produced the modern idea of "normal" and inaugurated a paradigm shift in conceptions of the body. Before statistics, Western culture assumed that, to varying degrees, all bodies fell below an ideal standard. After statistics, though, culture differentiated between normal bodies situated "under the main umbrella" of the bell curve and abnormal ones located at the extremes. No one had been expected to have an ideal body, but everyone was encouraged to have a normal one (1999, p. 37). Different political paradigms shaped these different bodily paradigms. A feudal and monarchical system assumed that "perfection, power and wealth" were rightly concentrated atop a social and political pyramid and distributed in decreasing amounts to the aristocracy and peasantry. Consequently, this paradigm promoted a similarly hierarchical view of degrees of bodily perfection and imperfection (1999, pp. 38-39). In contrast, in bourgeois democracies founded upon documents such as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) or American Declaration of Independence (1776) officeholders claimed authority not by virtue of approximating perfection but rather by representing an electorate composed of individuals assumed to be equal to other individuals (1999, pp. 38-39). Therefore, that newer paradigm shaped or even required a

concept of the average, normal citizen. As Davis puts it, "A collective voting decision can be thought of as nothing more than the tabulation of individual variations, and the result is the election of a person who is supposed to represent a norm of opinion or sentiment … Democracy needs the illusion of equality, and equality needs the fiction of the equal or average citizen" (1999, p. 40). Like Davis, Vonnegut interrogates the aspiration to equality announced at the founding of the American republic, as he opens his story: "The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal" (2007b, p. 7).

Of course, the adverb "finally" marks the disjunction between Vonnegut's dystopia and the America of 1961. In Vonnegut's future America, a key step in the process Davis charts has been omitted or reversed. According to Davis, Francis Galton, the pioneering statistician and ardent eugenicist, revised the bell curve to create a "statistical Ideal" that would privilege and promote extremes of desired traits (1995, p. 35). Thanks to Galton, then, American parents seeking reassurance that their children are "normal" are rarely if ever worried that those children might be taller or more intelligent than average. The description of Harrison's parents demonstrates, though, that in their society "average" and "normal" are synonymous: "Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

a little mental handicap radio in his ear" (2007b, p. 7). Vonnegut later reinforces the equation between "normal" and "average," when the "perfectly average" Hazel asks, "Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" (2007b, pp. 7, 8). Vonnegut's USA of 2081 is dystopian largely because the societal pressure to be "normal" has become a societal pressure to be average and the demand to conform to the norm regularly applied to those judged deficient in desired traits applies also to those judged to possess desired traits in excess. Thus, at fourteen Harrison has been removed from his home and parents and institutionalized because he is "abnormal" (2007b, p. 9), physically and intellectually far above average, and suspected of seditious thoughts.

The equalizing procedures in Vonnegut's dystopia necessitate an elaborate regime of measurement and control, a hyperbolic counterpart to the nearly totalitarian network of normalizing institutions—from daycare to nursing homes—that, Davis contends, control the twentieth-century American "patient-citizen" (1999, p. 45). As the description of a particular ballerina demonstrates, agents of the Handicapper General precisely calibrate artificial impairments to correspond to the individual's attributes: "She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred pound men" (p. 10).

These equalizing procedures erase differential talent and produce interchangeable workers like those that, according to Davis (1999), industrial capitalism seeks. The ballerinas performing on television are "no better than anybody else would have been," and, when Harrison's mother Hazel proposes that she "would make a good Handicapper General," her husband George replies, "Good as anybody else" (2007b, p. 8). Of course, in Vonnegut's dystopia radical interchangeability produces mediocrity.

The equalizing techniques employed in Vonnegut's dystopia, as applied to those farthest above average and consequently in greatest need of handicapping, produce cyborgs, organic and mechanical hybrids. Vonnegut had earlier imagined artificial, equalizing handicaps in his 1959 science fiction novel *The Sirens of Titan*, as members of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent "gladly," even "proudly" handicap themselves (2007a, p. 223). Although characters in both the novel and story wear weights to offset physical strength, the novel depicts more low-tech, even immaterial handicaps. One man spoils his excellent eyesight by wearing glasses prescribed for someone else; certain women mar their extraordinary beauty with "frumpish clothes" and "ghoulish makeup"; a man with exceptional "predaceous sex appeal" handicaps himself by marrying a frigid wife (2007a, pp. 226-27). In the story, though, handicaps are more technological and invasive. Exceptionally intelligent citizens wear "little ear radio[s]"

## Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia, continued

that disrupt thought with blaring noises broadcast every 20 seconds. Harrison resembles a science-fiction cyborg: his appearance, the narrator reports, "was Halloween and hardware" (2007b, p. 11). He wears a "head-harness" that locks earphones and vision-distorting spectacles in place (2007b, p. 12). His handicapping violates corporeal boundaries perhaps most invasively as "black caps at snaggle-tooth random" cover his "even white teeth" (2007b, p. 11). Harrison's more compliant father George acknowledges the blurring of corporeal boundaries casually, as he remarks, concerning the handicapping weight padlocked around his neck, "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me" (2007b, p. 9). He thus speaks in true cyborg fashion, as if anticipating a question Donna Haraway poses in her "Cyborg Manifesto": "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (2004, p. 36). Although neither "lively" nor "microelectronic," the inert bag of birdshot hung about his neck leads George to experience the blurring of somatic boundaries that Haraway attributes to "cybernetic machines" (2004, pp. 10-12). As anticipations of Haraway's more technologically sophisticated human-machine hybrids, then, Harrison and the other handicapped characters in Vonnegut's story function as fantastic exceptions to Tobin Siebers's observation that, in Haraway's influential conception, "Prostheses always increase the cyborg's abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. … To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled" (2008, p. 63). Vonnegut's

handicapped characters, in turn, confirm Alison Kafer's contention that the cyborg "can be used to map many futures, not all of them feminist, crip, or queer" (2013, p. 128).

Harrison's dramatic revolt against the enforced equality of his world is not an act of liberation but a counter-revolutionary assertion of superiority and dominance and a return to earlier political and bodily paradigms. Vonnegut's narrator describes Harrison as semi-divine, approaching an intellectual and physical ideal: "a genius and an athlete," seven feet tall at age fourteen, gifted with unprecedented physical strength and a face "that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder" (2007b, p. 10, 12). Not surprisingly, Harrison invokes the feudal paradigm and declares himself "Emperor." He proposes, as Darryl Hattenhauer (1998) puts it, "a reversion to medieval monarchy," as he promises to make exemplary subjects "barons and dukes and earls" (2007b, p. 12, Hattenhauer, 1998, p. 391, Bogar, 2018, p. 40). For all his apparent perfection, though, Harrison seems a deeply flawed, perhaps predictably childish ruler. As he stamps his foot to punctuate his demands, he makes the room shake. He literally objectifies his subjects as he "snatche[s] two musicians from their chairs, wave[s] them like batons" and "slam[s] them back into their chairs" (2007b, p. 12). He fails to anticipate the Handicapper General's counter-attack and squanders his prison break on a gravity defying dance display (2007b, p. 12-13).

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

For different reasons, Davis and Vonnegut both warn against idealizing equality. For Vonnegut, such equality produces numbing mediocrity, or worse. Vonnegut suggests that compelling everyone to conform to the average eventually lowers that average. Hazel Bergeron's "perfectly average intelligence" in 2081 would constitute intellectual impairment in 2021 (2007b, p. 7). Because she can only think "in short bursts," minutes after witnessing her son's televised assassination, she cannot recall why she has been crying: "'It's all kind of mixed up in my mind,' said Hazel" (2007b, p. 14). Vonnegut concludes his story by foregrounding this American dumbing down in dialogue that echoes, to cite one precedent, the Three Stooges. George winces as his handicapping radio transmitter broadcasts the sound of a riveting gun in his ear:

"Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

The "perfectly average" Hazel, who not only aspires to be the evidently all-powerful Handicapper General Diana Moon Glampers but also bears "a strong resemblance" to her, replies with empty-headed literalism: ""Gee- … I could tell that one was a doozy" (2007b, pp. 8, 14).

Davis articulates his warning most explicitly in the concluding paragraph of his 1999 essay "The Rule of Normalcy," where he asserts, guardedly at first, "the move of people with disabilities to frame the struggle in terms of civil rights and equality is something one might want to question" (p. 46). There, he presents seeds of concepts he has developed further in subsequent essays proposing a "dismodernist view of the body" (2002, p. 45). "Equal access and equal rights are certainly important," Davis asserts in "The Rule of Normalcy," but they are not sufficient and "will come" with "the backdraft of that complex agenda" (1999, p. 46). That agenda, I infer, is postmodern identity politics, "directed," he contends in *Bending Over Backwards*, "toward making all identities equal under a model of the rights of the dominant, often white, male, 'normal' subject," assumed to be complete and independent (2002, p. 44). As I understand Davis's fire-fighting metaphor, if in an attempt to extinguish ableism, we are satisfied to demand equal civil rights—accessible schools and polling places, for example—we add oxygen to that model of identity and thus unleash further explosive harm.

As Davis asserts in "The Rule of Normalcy" that people with disability "may get their equal rights … and join the ranks of the 'privileged' normals," he implies that in doing so, they would risk leaving other oppressed people behind, excluded from the "privileged" category. "To become part of the solution", he notes, "one may become part of the problem" (1999, p. 46). In fact, as Tom Shakespeare has observed, equal access, as conceived in the Americans with Disabilities Act or UN Convention on the Rights of Persons

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

with Disabilities, would leave even people with certain disabilities behind:

But what about someone with an intellectual disability or a serious mental health condition? What about someone with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome who can never work the same hours and at the same intensity as a nondisabled person? In these cases, the level playing field argument breaks down. Many people with disabilities are not able to earn a living in a wage-based economy or have a restricted capacity to do so. Barrier removal and equal treatment are not enough to ensure that all disabled people enjoy an equivalent standard of living, let alone achieve a good quality of life in the fullest sense (2014, p. 23).

Further, Davis's conviction that the "problem" will persist even after people with disability have entered into the privileged category of normal may anticipate his claim in *Bending over Backwards* that disability studies illuminates "how all groups, based on physical traits or markings, are selected for disablement by a larger system of regulation and signification" (2002, p. 43). The work of Douglas Baynton (2001), demonstrating that putative disability has functioned in American history to justify enslaving Black Americans, disenfranchising women, and excluding potential immigrants helps substantiate Davis's claim. In *Bending over Backwards* Davis appears to broaden the fundamental premise of the social model of disability—that the physical and social environments disable—and apply it to even those without conventional physical or mental impairments, as he states, "It is too easy to say, 'We're all disabled.' But it is possible to say that we are all disabled by injustice and oppression of various kinds" (2002, pp. 45-46). Davis points to some concrete ways in which this is true: gun violence, sweatshop working conditions, and landmines, for example, create physical disabilities (2002, pp. 42-43). He goes on to assert more broadly, "We are all nonstandard … What is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body. Yet the fantasy of culture, democracy, capitalism, sexism, and racism, to name only a few ideologies, is the perfection of the body and its activities" (2002, p. 46). None of us inhabit a complete, autonomous, perfectible body; if social and political systems assume that we do, they disable. Consequently, as he concludes his critique of equal rights in "The Rule of Normalcy," Davis asserts, "It should be the goal of a liberatory movement based on disability rights to know the way that rights create disability …" (1999, p. 46). Of course, in Vonnegut's dystopia enforcing equality quite literally creates impairments: attention deficits and chronic fatigue for George Bergeron, for example.

In turn, Davis's dismodernist view of the body parallels tenets of both Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" and Patty Berne's "10 Principles of Disability Justice." Haraway, who rejects "seductions to organic wholeness" and "unitary identity" and

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

declares, "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism"; Davis understands the body as incomplete and open to completion by technology, from contact lenses and hearing aids to pacemakers and insulin regulators (Haraway, 2004, p. 9, 38; Davis, 2002, p. 41). Technology, he asserts, "is not separate but part of the body" (2002, p. 40). Moreover, Davis grounds his own call for the end of identity politics upon Haraway's advocacy of coalitions rooted in affinity "related not by blood but by choice" (2004, p. 13; Davis, 2013, p. 17). Haraway and Davis both perceive the bases of identity politics collapsing. "With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity," Haraway contends (2004, pp. 13-14). Davis adds that "in transgender and queer circles the emphasis has moved from individuals, that is, identities, to viewpoints, tactics, and analyses" (2013, p. 17). Consequently, chosen affinities rather than essential identities offer a foundation for coalitions.

In 2005, shortly after Davis proposed "dismodernist ethics" in *Bending over Backwards*, "Black, brown, queer, and trans" people with disability founded the Disability Justice Collective and began advancing a critique of the "first-wave" disability rights movement that had led to passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 15). Davis's proposal shares several principles of the Disability Justice movement, as articulated by Patty Berne, namely, interdependence, anticapitalism, and intersectionality. At first glance, Davis's conviction that the dismodern subject is incomplete may seem at odds with the Disability Justice principle Berne labels "Recognizing Wholeness," which asserts, "Disabled people are whole people" (Berne, 2018, p. 228). The conflict diminishes, though, if we recognize that both writers are defending the worth of people with disabilities, Davis by resisting disability stigma and asserting that all people are "partial, incomplete," "non-standard," and Berne by insisting, as she elaborates this principle, that "people have inherent worth outside of capitalist notions of productivity" (2002, pp. 44, 46; Berne, 2018, p. 228). Moreover, since, in another Disability Justice principle, Berne acknowledges "the nature of interdependence within our communities," the "wholeness" recognized in her "10 Principles" does not correspond to the "whole, independent, unified, self-making, and capable" postmodern subject that Davis proposes to displace (Berne 2018, p. 228; Davis, 2002, p. 40). For Davis, as for Berne, dependence and hence interdependence "is the rule"; "realization" for the dismodern subject "is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence" (2002, pp. 40, 44).

Further, as we have seen, Davis groups capitalism with sexism, racism, and neoliberal democracy as ideologies that rest upon the fantasy of a perfectible body (2002, p. 46). Capitalism, which as noted

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

above seeks interchangeable workers, deprives and oppresses people whose bodies are manifestly and persistently not perfectible. By "all estimates," Davis asserts, "the majority of people with disability are poor, unemployed, and undereducated" (2002, p. 42). To update Davis's statistics a bit, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, only 21% of people with a disability participated in the workforce, compared to 69% of people without a disability, and the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was more than double the rate for people without disabilities (Division of Labor Force Statistics, 2020). Moreover, although people with disabilities are underrepresented in the American workforce, they are overrepresented in the prison population. In 2015, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that inmates in local jails were "more than 4 times more likely than the general population to report having at least one disability."  Davis also cites a 2000 New York Times report that people designated "mentally retarded" made up 10% of death-row inmates, yet the federal government estimated in 1993 that they were less than 1% of the general population (Centers for Disease Control, 1993).

Davis also anticipates the Disability Justice movement's attention to intersectionality, as he observes in *Bending Over Backwards* that "the oppression of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people—often intersects in familiar and unfamiliar ways with the mechanisms of disablement." Regarding race, Davis also notes the "disproportionate number" of African American men impaired by gunshot wounds, many of whom are further disabled by incarceration in inaccessible facilities (2002, p. 43). Disability Justice writers such as Berne, who have charged that the disability rights movement "invisibilized the lives of "disabled people of color" as well as queer, "trans and gender non-conforming people with disabilities" (Sins Invalid 2019, p. 15), might not join Davis in welcoming the "end of identity politics"; even so, they could find support for their project in Davis's dismodernist ethics (Davis, 2002, p. 8).

In their respective texts, Vonnegut and Davis each think beyond equal rights. Vonnegut imagines an oppressive, disabling dystopia, and Davis "proposes a Utopian way of rethinking the body and identity" (2002, p. 19). Notwithstanding these differences in the two writers' critiques of equality, the climax of Vonnegut's story, as the Handicapper General ends the oversized Harrison's gravity-defying dance with two blasts from a ten-gauge shotgun, anticipates and dramatizes Davis's warning with its metaphors of violence and weaponry: "equality is a two-edged sword that carves out ethical space but also cuts down bodies to convenient and usable size" (1999, p. 46). ∎

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

# References

Baynton, D. C. (2001). Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History. In P. K. Longmore & L. Umansky (Eds.), T*he New Disability History: American Perspectives* (pp. 33-57). New York, NY: NYU Press.

Berger, J. (2014). *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Berne, P., Morales, A. L., Langstaff, D., & Invalid, S. (2018). Ten Principles of Disability Justice. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 46*(1), 227-230. doi:10.1353/wsq.2018.0003.

Bogár, Á. T. (2018). Leveling the Playing Field: Cultural Relativism and Inequality. In K. Drake (Ed.), *Critical Insights: Inequality* (pp. 35-46). Ipswich, MA: Salem Press.

Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2015). *Disabilities among Prison and Jail Inmates, 2011-12*. https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5500.

Centers for Disease Control. (1993). *State-specific Rates of Mental Retardation — United States, 1993*. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00040023.htm.

Couser, G. T. (2009). *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*. Ann Arbor, MICH: University of Michigan Press.

Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. New York, NY: Verso.

Davis, L. J. (1999). The Rule of Normalcy: Politics and Disability in the USA United States of Ability. In M. Jones & L. A. B. Marks (Eds.) *Disability, Diversability and Legal Change* (pp. 35-48). The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhof.

Davis, L. J. (2002). *Bending over Backwards: Essays on Disability and the Body*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Davis, L. J. (2013). *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era*. Ann Arbor, MICH: University of Michigan Press.

Division of Labor Force Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, February 26). *Persons with a Disability, 2019: Current Population Survey*. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/pdf/dol-odep-2019-briefing-appended-submission.pdf.

Eisenhower, D. D. (1955, October 10). *Executive Order 10640—The President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped*. The American Presidency Project. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10640-the-presidents-committee-employment-the-physically-handicapped.

## References, continued

Fleischer, D. Z., Zames, F. D., & Zames, F. (2012). *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Gilroy, P. (2000). Against Race: *Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haraway, D. J. (2004). *The Haraway Reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hattenhauer, D. (1998). The Politics of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." *Studies in Short Fiction*, 35(4), 387-394. https://bit.ly/3lAcnUW

Jennings, A. (2016). *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

McCollum, H. (Director). 1951. *Hula-la-la* [Short Film]. New York, NY: Columbia Pictures.

National institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. (2016). *Quick Statistics about Voice, Speech, Language*. https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-voice-speech-language#ftn1).

Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2018). *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver, CA: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Reed, B. (2015). Technologies of Instant Amnesia: Teaching Kurt Vonnegut's" Harrison Bergeron" to the Millennial Generation. *Teaching American Literature*, 8(1). 45-69. https://www.cpcc.edu/sites/default/files/2019-06/taltp-spring-2015-reed.pdf

Shakespeare, T. (2014). Deepening Disability Justice: Beyond the Level Playing Field. *Tikkun, 29*(4). 10.1215/08879982-2810026

Siebers, T. (2008). *Disability Theory.* Ann Arbor, MICH: University of Michigan Press.

Sins Invalid. (2019). *Skin, Tooth and Bone: The Basis of Our Movement Is Our People, A Disability Justice Primer* (2nd ed). Berkeley, CA: Sins Invalid. https://www.sinsinvalid.org/news-1/2019/11/12/skin-tooth-and-bone-2nd-edition-available-now

Stiker, H. J. (2019). *A History of Disability*. Ann Arbor, MICH: University of Michigan Press.

Vonnegut, K. (2007a). *The Sirens of Titan: A Novel*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

## References, continued

Vonnegut, K. (2007b). *Welcome to the Monkey House: Stories*. New York, NY: Dial Press.

## Notes

1. "Identities, narratives, and experiences based on disability," Siebers asserts, have the status of theory because they represent locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism" (Siebers 2008, p. 14).

2. Television's centrality in the story prompts Benjamin Reed to argue that Vonnegut is satirizing the "cognitive damage wrought by television" (Reed 2015, pp. 57, 59).

3. As of 2016, the National Institutes of Health has reported that "5 percent of U.S. children ages 3-17" have experienced a speech disorder for a week or longer and that one percent of Americans stutter (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders 2016).

4. In fact, as Henri-Jacques Stiker analyzes the history of the word "handicap" in French (with some attention to English as well), he argues that the later meaning concerning disability retains connotations of the earlier horseracing sense. Under the rehabilitation paradigm, which Stiker contends emerged at the start of World War I:

   The handicapped person must recover his chances, chances equal to those of others. He should be able to compare himself to others; he should no longer be different, no more different than the horses that have been equalized. He should run the common course. This image of horse racing corresponds exactly to that of the handicapped person who has to catch up, rejoin the normal and normalized group, be one of them. The horse racing application of the word is the right one. (2019, p. 148)

5. Davis explains, "Galton's genius was to change the bell curve to an ogive in which the extreme right side would flip upward and cease being the area of the abnormal. Rather the fourth or fifth quintile would become the location of very desirable traits—in his case, height, strength, intelligence, and even beauty ... Seeming to be an ideology of democracy and utilitarianism, the norm actually acted as a rationale for rule by elites" (2013, pp. 1-2).

6. For Benjamin Reed, this passage illustrates the "chief ironic motif" in Vonnegut's story: "the mask is also the thing that reveals ... Those who are handicapped retain an inverse yet obvious reflection of their outlawed superiority. The attempt to achieve

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

## **Notes,** continued

forced equality … by delimiting positive qualities rather than ameliorating shortcomings is futile …" (Reed 2015, p. 55). That futility seems especially clear if we assume, as the narrator suggests, that the primary reason for equalizing the population is to protect everyone's self-esteem: "so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in" (Vonnegut 2007b, p. 8).

7. Vonnegut's narrator suggests that the evidently voluntary self-handicapping depicted in The Sirens of Titan had initially been coerced, "as proselytizers had threatened unbelievers with the righteous displeasure of crowds" (2007a, pp. 229-30).

8. As the grouping with "feminist" and "queer" here suggests, by a "crip" future, Kafer means a future supportive of the rights and needs of people with disability, one informed by a "disability studies perspective" (2013, p. 128). She makes this observation after noting that Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, who coined the term "cyborg" in a 1960 article in which they imagined implanting pumps to medicate astronauts likely to experience psychosis during prolonged space flight, both worked in the Rockland State Hospital, a psychiatric facility, she asserts, "infamous for its

poor and negligent behavior toward patients" (2013, p. 127). "Arguing for the breakdown between self and other, body and machine," Kafer contends, takes on a different hue in the context of coercive medical experimentation and confinement" (2013, p. 128). A society, like Vonnegut's America of 2081, that focuses its ingenuity not on enabling the impaired but rather on impairing the exceptionally strong, intelligent, or graceful does not constitute the "accessible future" that Kafer seeks (2013, pp. 3, 168).

9. In the short film Hula-la-la set on a "South Sea" island, a native woman warns the Stooges that, "The witch doctor is a bad man." Larry replies, "You can say that again," and the woman literally says again, "The witch doctor is a bad man" (McCollum 1951). Of course, later in the 1960s, most episodes of Laugh In ended with much the same joke, as Dan Rowan would direct Dick Martin, "Say 'good night,' Dick," and Martin would literally say "Good night, Dick."

10. When Davis republishes this essay in Bending over Backwards, he drops the metaphor and replaces "backdraft" with "repercussions" (2002, p. 132).

11. The social model contends, for example, that a built environment that lacks ramps and elevators (rather

**Enforcing Normalcy in Vonnegut's Transhuman Dystopia**, continued

## **Notes,** continued

than paraplegia itself) disables a wheelchair user (Couser 2009, p. 26).

12. As Siebers and Kafer note, in a sentence vexed by an antiquated use of the term "handicapped," Haraway speculates, "Perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices" (Haraway 2004, p. 36; Kafer 2013, p. 111; Siebers 2008, p. 63).

13. As Davis concludes his essay "The End of Identity Politics and the Beginning of Dismodernism," he embraces Paul Gilroy's assertion that "The reoccurrence of pain, disease, humiliation, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial" (Gilroy 2000, 17, Davis, 2002, p. 46).

14. Davis's observation closely parallels Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's assertion that "More than that, disability justice asserts that ableism helps make racism, christian [sic] supremacy, sexism, and queer- and transphobia possible, and that all those systems of oppression are locked up tight" (2018, p. 22).

15. Berne does acknowledge that the disability rights movement constituted "a concrete and radical move forward toward justice for disabled people." Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, who quotes Berne at length, contends the threat of "invisibilizing" persists: "our work and terminology are in danger, now and always, of having the fact that they were invented by Black, Indigenous, and people of color erased and their politics watered down" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, p. 20).

# Unbounding the Black Imago: How Representation of Blackness in Superhero Fiction Propagates a Negative Model of Anti-Racist Practice

**Adebayo Oluwayomi**

The artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers [or artists] who stereotype or ignore [Blacks] and other minorities in the final analysis stereotype and distort their own humanity.

—*Ralph Ellison (1953)*

**Abstract:** Comic series or books explore stories involving figures with super, or at least extraordinary powers, whose actions tend to keep the world safe. In this article, I will examine graphic fictional series as a metaphor for race relations in the U.S. socio-cultural landscape. This will especially involve a focus on how the artistic representation of Blackness in the comics produced mainly by white writers and illustrators within popular culture, reflects a vision of "diversity" as imagined from a white racial perspective. Within such imagery, Blackness is represented as an appendage of whiteness in the visualization of a futuristic template for racial reconciliation and inclusion. This approach to the representation of racial diversity spawns a white privileged model of superhero fiction that begets negative methods of imagining anti-racist or racial justice advocacy. To grapple with this problem, I argue that the artistic performance in Black-created comic series is not only effective in countering negative images of Blacks but also serves as a potent vehicle for positive anti-racist practice. Black comic series, especially the Brotherman Comic series, are explored as a possible alternative for the imagination of positive models of anti-racist practice in superhero fiction. The illustrations and diverse characters in Brotherman Comic series offer a fascinating vision of diversity, which shows that the creators of this comic series are engaged in a different kind of artistic performance (from those produced within American popular culture) that orients us towards a more positive template for racial justice.

**Keywords:** Comic Series, Black Representation, Black Women, and Diversity

## Mad Scientists and Misinformed Citizens

Superhero fiction is an important medium of representation and enculturation within American popular culture. It employs various modes of artistic and literary creativity to provide fantasies that tickle the imagination, entertain, and educate its audience. Most comic series or books utilize the idea/ideal of fictional heroes with fantastical powers or abilities to inspire their readers to be something more than themselves, including aspiring to culturally relevant values such as

patriotism, tenacity, and collective social responsibility, depending on the inclination of their creators. Although most superheroes created within this genre are fantasized as imaginary characters, the comic book superhero remains a fantasy grounded in real-world situations and history (Wright 2001; Nama 2011). Thus, fictional superheroes can be regarded as cultural icons, with real-life impact. This means that they can be considered as a product of a very particular kind of fantasy, one that posits the ability of an ordinary citizen to become an extraordinary hero, all in a world that looks remarkably like our own. For instance, the fictional Superman may be a superpowered alien from a distant planet, but his superhuman feats happen on the streets and in the skies of Metropolis, USA (Francis, 2015). Another fictional superhero, Captain America, was designed to represent a patriotic super-soldier during the World War II era, whose emblematic American flag motif was imagined to bolster the utmost sense of love for country and duty to serve during the challenging years of the wartime period. This corroborates the observation by Berger (1971) that "comics are worth studying as a kind of window into certain aspects of American society" (Berger, 1971, p. 167).

In his insightful essay "Superhero Comics: Artifacts of the U.S. experience," Chambliss (2012) argues that comic books and their legendary characters were not merely designed for entertainment and fictional amusement. Rather, creators of this medium sought the context of the superhero archetype and used comic books as cultural markers for postwar America. This then orients us towards an assessment of the overarching significance of all of these efforts—an acknowledgment that comic books and super heroes offer a distinct way to understand U.S. culture. This results in the place of comic books in contemporary discussion of the American experience being seen as a space linked to popular culture. As Chambliss further reiterates, "the comic book genre, especially its most popular aspect, the superhero, uses visual cues to reduce individual characters into representations of cultural ideas" (Chambliss 2012, p. 148). Sometimes these visual cues are drawn from representations of race, gender, sexuality, cultural symbols, and other categories of identity that significantly influence how the audience perceives the characters. For example, the Superman "S" logo is regarded as a symbol of hope, and Captain America's red, white, and blue costume is seen as an icon for America during World War II. Both superhero characters are imagined as white, strong males who are moral exemplars and the embodiments of the American ideals of freedom and justice. This emphasizes the significance of comics as an integral and influential part of contemporary American popular culture (Stein, Meyer & Edlich 2011). Thus, the notion of representation is crucial in the comic strip artistic medium because it mirrors images or ideas that are drawn from within the

social fabric. However, at the same time, it aims to extend the possibilities that can be generated through fictional leitmotifs that are imagined as realistic possibilities within a particular cultural praxis.

In superhero comics of the late 1970s through the 1990s produced by DC Comics and Marvel Comics (two major producers of this genre within American popular culture) superheroes were depicted as predominantly all-powerful white characters while Black and other non-white superheroes were either absent or depicted as an appendage to the white superheroes. DC and Marvel comics have played a significant and defining role in the construction of the superhero figure and its imprinting on the collective consciousness of American society. They produced enduring, if not iconic, images of numerous superheroes, such as Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Wolverine, Elektra, Aquaman, and Captain America, just to mention a few (Nama, 2011). Both DC and Marvel revolutionized superhero fiction in the early 60s through the introduction of these superheroes. Marvel heroes were mostly portrayed as ordinary people concealed as superheroes. However, DC superhero characters wore disguises so that they would seem to be average people; for example, Superman was designed as an alien (Kal-El) disguised as the average Clark Kent. During this period, most of the superhero characters created by these two producers were predominantly conceived as white people with extraordi-

nary abilities, thus solidifying a white-privileged model of superhero fiction.

However, around the 70s and 80s, what is commonly referred to as the Bronze Age of Comic Books, DC and Marvel Comics began to "diversify" their comic book material to include non-white/non-male superhero characters. This essay does not focus, per se, on the issue of lack of diversity in the representation of superheroes within this genre. The relative absence of diversity in superhero fiction has been profoundly criticized and discussed in the literature within this field of study as in Ellison (1953), Inge (1990), Reynolds (1992), McGrath (2007), and Royal (2007). The latest iterations of such critiques have been articulated by Howard & Jackson (2013), Gateward & Jennings (2015), Cook (2017), and Hunt (2019). However, scholarship on this subject has not focused much on the ways through which remedial efforts or attempts to resolve the lack of racial diversity within comic series in American popular culture reflect a negative pattern of racial justice advocacy. Herein lies the central question that is grappled with in this essay: in what ways do the remedial strategies to represent Blackness in comic strips engender negative models of anti-racist practices?

## Color them Black: How White Comic Strips Engender Negative Models of Anti-Racist Practice

In his classic essay "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison (1953) critically engaged with how

## Unbounding the Black Imago, continued

fictional creations within popular culture negatively portray the Black imago in a subaltern relation to whiteness. He observes that instead of creating imaginative visions of a society where sincere appreciation of the values of diversity is upheld, science fiction (including fictional narratives/representations in comic strips) utilizes stereotypes of African Americans to achieve other purposes. He describes such kinds of inter-racial representations in fictional representations as serving as a means by which the white American creators seek to resolve the dilemma arising between their acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and their treatment of every non-white man as though he were not—a means, in other words, of reconciling the contradictions between an ideology of inclusion and the history and practice of prejudice. Thus, Ellison (1953) anticipates the problem being highlighted in this essay which examines the ways by which they endeavor to "color" superhero characters Black in the quest for inter-racial representation actually devolves into a negative anti-racist artistic practice. Due to its foundational reliance on character iconography, comics are well suited to project assumptions about identity categories that problematize ethnic, gender, or racial representation, especially as they find form in visual language (Royal, 2007). A critical look at some of these attempts to diversify the comic strips drawing examples from selected DC and Marvel



***Figure 1:*** *Superman's Girl Friend*, Lois Lane, #106 November 1970
©DC Comics

comics will provide more nuance to this issue.

For instance, in the Superman comic series, a white female fictional character known as Lois Lane was created and imagined as the principal romantic interest of the white male superhero (Fig. 1). During the Silver Age of Comics (the 1960s), this fictional character was designed as the star of *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane*, a comic book series that had a light and humorous tendency.

However, in issue #106 of *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane*, published in November 1970, the white graphic illustrators decided to transform Lois Lane into a Black woman, who wishes to experience what it means to exist as a Black person in an anti-black society. The white illustrators and graphic artist  (Curt Swann, Murphy Anderson, Werner Roth and Ross Andru) deployed this strategy to "include" Black images in the series without necessarily developing an entirely new Black superhero character.

## Unbounding the Black Imago, continued



**Figure 2:** Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane, #106 November 1970
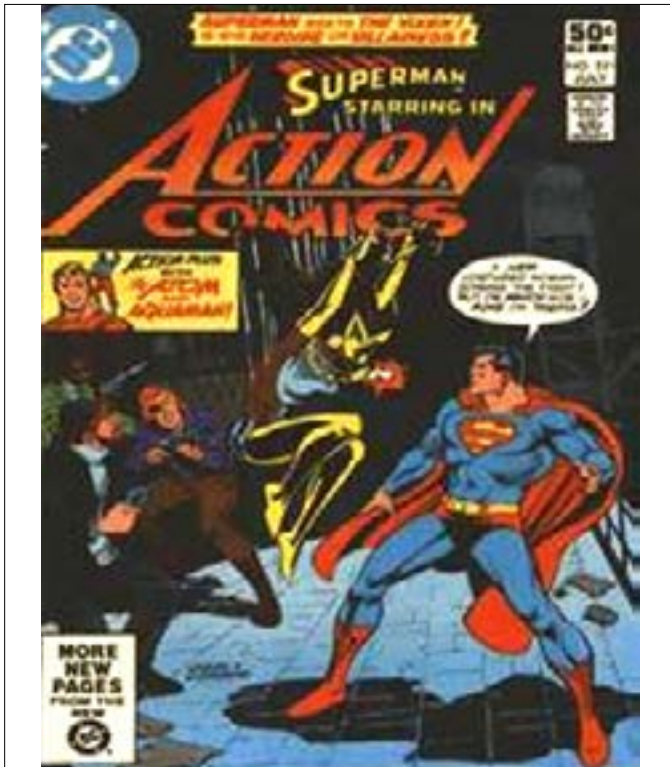©DC Comics

This is a prototypical example of a white-privileged model of superhero fiction. This is what is ostensibly depicted in Fig. 2; the actual stages or processes involved in the transformation of the pigmentation of Lois Lane, from a white woman to a Black woman.

In Fig 1, the illustrators/artists played on the trope of sexual racism and the genderized aspects of anti-black racism by creating a scene in which Lois Lane confronts Superman about the possibility of him (a white male superhero) marrying a Black woman. As shown in the cartoon, the character of Lois Lane states, "suppose I couldn't change back (from Black to white), would you marry me? Even if I'm Black? An outsider in a white man's world."

In a sense, the references to the insider-outsider dynamics here are used to reinforce the idea of group affiliations as an important element of social group hierarchy, as articulated under Social Dominance Theory (SDT)—a theory of intergroup oppression. According to Social Dominance Theory, group-based social hierarchy is produced by the net effects of discrimination across multiple levels: institutions, individuals, and collaborative intergroup processes. Discrimination across these levels combines to favor dominant groups over subordinate groups by legitimizing myths or societal, consensually shared social ideologies (Pratto, Sidanius & Levin, 2006). Under the frame of SDT, within dominant groups, in-group males are expected to have intimate relations with in-group females while out-group females, though considered as inferior persons, are objects of "exotic" intimate attraction (sexual fantasy) for in-group males. Thus, an analysis of the spoken comments of Lois Lane cited above through SDT, reveals the gender and racial dynamics between the "expected" social/intimate relations between white males (in-group males), and white women (in-group females) in this instance. Also, the fact that within this same edition, they made a white woman, who was transformed into a Black woman describe what it means to be Black as being "an outsider in a white man's world," shows that the creators of this fictional narrative were engaged in the normalization of white dominance. Furthermore, this form of dominance also objectifies the image of the Black woman as the "Other." Collins (2000, p. 69) poignantly notes that "as part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. [This is] because the authority to define social values is a

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



**Figure 3:** *Superman: The Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox.*
Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives. Conway, Gerry, Curt Swan,
Frank Ciaramonte, et.al. Action Comics, Superman, vol. 44, #521:
July, 1981.

major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood." Although the "coloration" or transformation of the white female comic book character into that of a Black female may have been made with good intentions, it does not erase the fact that it played on the complexities of racial reconciliation, tropes about the undesirability of Black women or Blacks in general or the awkwardness of cross-racial/bi-racial intimate relationships. As Collins (2000) suggests, this artistic performance reveals a negative ascription of Black women's status as "outsiders" as the point from which members of

dominant groups define their normality. The representation of Blackness, within this comic, was presented as something unattractive and something not to be desired, at least from a white-racial perspective, following the fact that Superman and his girlfriend were imagined as white figures. However, another attempt at the representation of Blackness, within the DC comic series' *Superman Action Comics* was published in July 1981. It was in this volume *The Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox*, that DC featured the dramatic debut of the Vixen (The debut of a female superhero who is African American). In this volume, Vixen was represented as a figure who worked in conjunction with Superman to stop some fraudulent U.S. businessmen (capitalists) who engaged in poaching across the globe (specifically in New Delhi, India). These "dirty" American capitalists were making profits from furs derived from poached exotic animals within this region. One of DC comics' aims for designing a Black female superhero as a character in this edition was to "diversify" superhero fiction to include non-white bodies or characters. In other words, to make the genre less racist in its representations of the racial identity of superheroes. While the idea of creating a Black female superhero is exciting, it plays on some faulty assumptions of anti-racist practice (Hutton, 2016). In this July edition of *Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox*, even though both Superman and Vixen were presented as fighting the "war" against resource exploitation together,

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



*Figure 4: Superman: The Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox. Action Comics, Superman, vol. 44, #521: July, 1981.* Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives.



*Figure 5: Superman: The Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox.* Action Comics, Superman, vol. 44, #521: July, 1981. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives.

only Superman was credited for the feats they both achieved. They made her anonymous in the end—symbolically crediting Superman (the white male superhero) for all her extraordinary exploits (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). The anonymization of Vixen (the Black female superhero) in this edition points to the erasure of Blackness from the fictive imagination of superhero competency. It is also this anonymization that was at play when a Black woman was imagined as the lover of to a white male superhero only in the body of a white female superhero (*white skin, Black*

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



Figure 6: *Superman: The Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox.* Action Comics, Superman, vol. 44, #521: July, 1981. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives.



Figure 7: © *Night Thrasher*, Vol. 1, No.1, August 1993. Published by Marvel Comics. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives (PN 6728 N53).

*mask*). As Singer (2002) rightly observes, "the stereotypes through which American popular culture often interprets and represents racial identity operate not only as tools of defamation but also as vehicles for far more subtle manipulations of race" (Singer, 2002, p. 107).

Comic books, and particularly the dominant genre of superhero comic books produced by white writers and illustrators, have also proven to be a fertile ground for stereotypical, racialized, and genderized depictions of Black male superheroes. Such depictions are often immersed in the construction of Black male superheroes using symbols of hypermasculinity such as rage, self-hatred, and assumed penchant for physical violence. This plays into the white imagination of the Black male as something that needs to be feared, grounded mostly in fictive hegemonic notions of masculine physicality and sexuality. In this instance, comics rely upon visually codified representations in which

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

characters are continually reduced to their appearances, and this reductionism is especially prevalent in superhero comics, whose characters are wholly externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases (Singer, 2002). This form of stereotypical depiction of the Black male superhero is noticeable in Marvel Comics' *Night Thrasher*. This comic series was illustrated by Stan Lee (a white male graphic artist/illustrator) and was conceived as a "limited book series" that features an African American superhero—Night Thrasher.

In the August 1993 volume, the African American male superhero (Night Thrasher), was portrayed as someone whose superhero status was achieved due to his troubled childhood. From the time that his parents were killed while he was a child, Dwayne Taylor (Night Thrasher) was raised to be a 'walking weapon in the war against crime.' His entire adulthood was presented as reconciliation with his troubled past, which spurs him into attempting to gain control of his future. As a measure of his mature status, Dwayne was portrayed as someone who is working overtime to have a grip on the rest of the world. In this instance, the Black male is imagined as hegemonic and lashing out at society due to his troubled childhood experiences. The comic series stereotype of the Black male superhero as hyper-sexed and extremely violent in his approach to his superhero preoccupation is a sharp contrast to the moralistic and benevolent Superman. The illustrators also engaged in the racialization of Dwayne's

background or community, by depicting it through the lens of a stereotypical urban neighborhood, using such imagery as "the sight, smells, and sounds, graffiti, garbage in the warm air, shuffling feet on the concrete" (Lee, 1993). These were the very first words the reader is introduced to in the comic book. In a nutshell, the *Night Thrasher* limited series was the story of a young Black man trying to gain control throughout his life. It was about a Black boy who grew to adulthood under a specter of misplaced hatred, revenge, and (in many ways) self-loathing. This storyline plays on a caricaturized portrayal of the social environment in which Black children from low-income communities are adjudged to have reached adulthood. Lopes (2006) and Facciani, M., Warren, P. & Vendemia, J. (2015) point to how children (in this case Black boys) are stigmatized in popular media as a social group, engendered by the shifting ethos of America's racial landscape.

Although these writers/illustrators were interested in characterizing Blackness in these comic strips, how they tried to achieve this engenders negative models of anti-racist practice, namely, the racialized substitution of Black characters for white characters. This negative model of anti-racist practice is documented in Shannon Sullivan's *Good white people: The problem with middle-class white anti-racism*. Sullivan (2014) describes this phenomenon of racialized substitution of Black characters for white ones, as evident in *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane*,

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

published in November 1970 and the Superman volume on T*he Deadly Adventure of the Lady Fox*, as a kind of ontological expansiveness. She argues that in the context of anti-racist advocacy, "ontological expansiveness is the habit, often unconscious, of assuming and acting as if all spaces—geographical, psychological, cultural, linguistic, or whatever—are rightfully available to and open for white people to enter whenever they like" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 20). Thus, the Black lived experience becomes an ontological space that white comic producers and illustrators can exploit at will. This approach to making comic series more "diverse" thrives on the assumption that whiteness must always be at the foundation of every effort(s) at diversifying spaces, including sci-fi and fantasy spaces. When Black superheroes are represented as "masked" white superheroes, it also communicates the idea that Blacks will always be subservient to whites and they cannot achieve things by themselves, even in the world of comic books.

A good example from Marvel Comics' *Night Thrasher* buttresses this point.

In Fig. 8, we see the image of a Black male superhero, Dwayne Taylor, who is actively engaged in weeding out unwanted elements. However, in the publishers' statement describing the racial identity of this superhero, it was stated that Dwayne Taylor is not a Black man yet, but needs to learn how to be one. The publisher fails to provide an account of



**Figure 8:** © *Night Thrasher*, Vol. 1, No.1, August 1993. Published by Marvel Comics. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives (PN 6728 N53).

what is needed to learn how to be a Black male. The prejudicial undertone of this assumption is value-laden, even though when considered on its face-value, it may seem innocuous. In *Fire in the heart: How white activists embrace racial justice*, Warren (2010), argues that despite this idea of color-blind racial ideology, many white people nevertheless perpetuate racial inequality and injustice. Brown (2018) describes color-blind racism, especially as an approach to anti-racist advocacy, as the attempt to dabble at diversity and inclusion while leaving the existing white authority and structures in place.

Another useful example of this negative approach to diversifying superhero representation in science fiction is noticeable in *Icon*, published by DC Comics in December 1996. In the edition of Icon Comic subtitled "Icon vs. Blood Syndicate," shown in Fig. 9, a Black superhero named

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



*Figure 9:* © *DC Comics*, *Icon* comic: "Icon vs. Blood Syndicate" #40. November, 1996. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives/Area Studies/ Africana PN 6728.6 D3 136, no. 40 (1996: Dec)

Pyre was imagined as working together with a "diverse" group of alien characters—the Blood Syndicate—on a mission to fight against systems of oppression and injustice. However, this episode of "iconic" exploits became interesting when Pyre was presented as consulting a group of rich white people to join him in fulfilling one of his many projects to fight injustice, and one of the rich white men called Pyre the "N" word (Fig. 10 ) for being so audacious. There is never a way to positively imagine an anti-racist or inclusive representation of Blackness within comic strips

that could justify the use of the "N" word in referring to a Black character—including a Black fictional character.

As evidenced in the comic books I have surveyed here, the notion of Blackness that the white graphic artists and illustrators made use of was a blend of caricatures, stereotypes, and tropes about Black people that feed into the imagination of their mostly white audience or fans. However, Brown (2018) impugns the essence of such white-privileged models of anti-racist practice by arguing that in

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



**Figure 10:** © *DC Comics*, *Icon* comic: "Icon vs. Blood Syndicate" #40. November 1996. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives: Area Studies/Africana

efforts concerning diversity, equity, and social justice, when white people stop short of reconciliation, it is often because they are motivated by a deep need to believe in their goodness, and for that goodness to be affirmed over and over again. These folks want a pat on the back simply for concluding that having people of color around is good. But racial reconciliation is not about white feelings. It's about diverting power and attention to the oppressed, towards the powerless. It's not enough to dabble at diversity and inclusion while leaving the existing authority structure in place. Reconciliation demands more (Brown, 2018, p. 171). This critique is an extension of the logic of the principle of interest convergence because it highlights some of the problems involved in white-privileged models of anti-racist practice. It also focuses on what genuine "diversity" efforts towards racial reconciliation should be—and accordingly, in what follows, imagines how positive models of anti-racist practice should engage in Black representation in comic strip/superhero fiction.

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

## The Stars are Ours: Exploring the Anti-Racist Practice in Black Comic Strips

> Science fiction has primed us all to look at our social world through the lens of anti-racism and to embrace the goals of equity and social justice.
>
> —*Coleman (2019)*

This quote above emphasizes the importance of science fiction in anti-racist or social justice advocacy. In this quotation, Coleman (2019) argues for a critical engagement with this media of racial representation as a way of turning surrealistic fantasies into reality, especially concerning diversity and representation in science fiction. Thus, the subtitle to this section, "the stars are ours," is deployed with the stars providing the road map towards a positive model of anti-racist practice in science fiction that represents Blackness or the Black imago, in humanizing ways. As Kendi (2019) sees it, any effort towards antiracist practice is a struggle about what it means to be fully human and to see that others are fully human.

In this context, the "stars" could also be seen as symbolizing the fictionalized universe where even the fictive imagination should not be trapped in the hegemonic and negative ways that the Black imago is imagined in white-privileged models of anti-racist practice. Rather, the idea of "the star is ours," signifies the quest to reclaim Blackness from the universes and shades of negative strokes with which

it was sketched in the superhero comic strips produced by mostly white graphic artists. Here, it is important to stress that the significance of Black superhero characters is not rooted in how authentically Black they are, but in terms of the alternative possibilities they offer for a more complex and unique expression of the Black racial identity (Nama, 2011).

According to the *Encyclopedia of Black Comics*, it was not until the mid-1960s that the first Black-themed comic strip created by a Black artist was syndicated in the mainstream American press. Gates, H.L. (2017). "Black superhero comic book figures are in many ways progressive representations when compared with the representation of Black people in early American science fiction."(Nama 2011, p. 36). This view stems from the type of artistic performance pursued by Black comic book outlets and graphic artists—it is a distinctive performance that seeks to represent Blackness or the Black imago in a humanistic fashion. This vision of highlighting Black humanism positively embraces the deep subtleties of the Black community. It encompasses the historical knowledge of the use of humor within the African American community as imperative to understanding the complexity of humor, satire, signification, metonymy, and various other figures of speech within Black comics that represent the Black community (Howard & Jackson, 2013). It is an effort to emphasize the Black imago in ways that are consistent with how Black people see themselves within the

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



**Figure 11:** © 1990. *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline—Revelation*. Big City Entertainment, Atlanta. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives/Science Fiction (PN6728.B76 B76)

community. As Carrington (2016) rightly observes, when we recognize the images of Blackness that speculative fiction disseminates as embedded in, rather than separated from, the same discursive terrain as other representations of racial identity, that is when we can seriously appreciate the notion that popular culture plays a role in mediating racial politics. Racial politics, as highlighted in the examples cited in this work, often caricatures Blackness or the representation of the image in negative ways.

The anti-racist practice in Black comic series is radically different from that observable in the comic strips produced by white graphic artists, especially

regarding the representation of Blackness. The artistic performance in *Brotherman Comics (Dictator of Discipline series)* embodies a vision of diversity or anti-racist practice that offers a positive representation of Blackness. The *Brotherman Comics* is an action comic series created in 1989 by Dawud Anyabwile (illustrator) and his brother, Guy A. Sims (writer).

The creators and illustrators of the *Brotherman Comic* series imagine a positive model of anti-racist practice in superhero fiction—especially as it has to do with the representation of Blackness. The illustrations and diverse characters in *Brotherman Comic* series offer a fascinating vision of diversity which shows that the creators of this comic strip are engaged in a kind of artistic performance (different from those produced within general American popular culture) that orients us towards a more positive template for racial justice, as well as expanding the range of representation of Blackness in the genre in ways that are more humane and nondiscriminatory.

*Brotherman* is the continuing story of humans drawn deeper into the darkness to bring light to those who have lost all hope. The illustrators of this Black comic series imagined the possibility of humans becoming superheroes as a "call-to-serve" humanity. This is what they worked into the philosophical undercurrent of the fictional narrative. This is what is referred to in the comic series as "the words of the unheeded messengers." Beyond the art

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



**Figure 12:** © 1990 *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline—Revelation*. Big City Entertainment, Atlanta Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives/ Science Fiction (PN6728.B76 B76)

and storylines, the impact of Brotherman has been and continues to be a creative catalyst for people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and nationalities; *Brotherman* is noted as a major catalyst for the modern-day Black comic book movement.

As a framework for imagining a positive notion of anti-racist practice that does not represent Blackness as an appendage of whiteness. *Brotherman Comic* provides a surrealistic universe where Black superheroes function not only as instruments of virtue in the world but also as superhe-

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued



*Figure 13:* © 1990 *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline—Revelation*. Big City Entertainment, Atlanta. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives/ Science Fiction (PN6728.B76 B76)

roes who can achieve great feats without being submerged under the shadows of white superhero figures—unbounding the Black imago. This is the thrust of the kind of artistic performance that differs from those within American popular culture—its representation of Blackness in a good light. Also, the artists show that the superhero archetype is heavily steeped

in affirming a division between right and wrong, which makes superheroes operate within a moral framework. Virtually all superheroes are victorious, not because of superior strength or weaponry, but because of moral determination as demonstrated by concern for others and notions of justice. Accordingly, superheroes within *Brotherman Comic* Black are

## Unbounding the Black Imago, continued



**Figure 14:** © 1990 *Brotherman: Dictator of Discipline—Revelation*. Big City Entertainment, Atlanta. Source: Cushing Memorial Library & Archives/Science Fiction (PN6728.B76 B76)

not merely figures that defeat costumed supervillains; they symbolize American racial morality and ethics (Nama, 2011).

*Brotherman Comics* is especially fascinating in its representation of diversity regarding the possibilities imagined for superhero figures across racial (and other embodied categories of power and social capital) affinities. This is contained in the words of the unheeded messengers, which highlight the underpinning philosophical ideas that inform the thrust of the graphic illustrations. Although the

illustrators centered on Black superheroes in the *Dictator of Discipline* series, they did not restrict the image of the superhero to only Black figures; rather, they imagine a world where other fictional characters can take on the same role of saving humanity in so far as they "heed" the call of the "messengers" to become a Brotherman. As the excerpt from the unheeded messengers (Figs. 13, 14) goes, it is for:

> *... those who sit and stare*
>
> *Watching the world go by*
>
> *Allowing a brother to fall in the street*
>
> *Only to avert their eye*

So, they see the "Brotherman" as those who will be courageous enough to step into the situation and reach out to those who have "fallen in the street." It is a humanistic vision that seeks to imagine everyone who dares or cares as superheroes. As made plain in the epistle of "unheeded messengers":

> *So, who will care when all is lost ...*
>
> *Who will dare stand tall in the dark*
>
> *And champion the weak of the fold*
>
> *The brother of man is the light in the night*
>
> *The foundation of justice to stand ...*
>
> *For yes, anyone but not everyone*
>
> *Shall personify* ***the Brotherman***

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

Essentially, anyone—at least anyone who cares—can be a personification of the Brotherman; this makes the imagining of diversity, in terms of superhero fiction, different from those imagined within popular American culture. Thus, it does not provide a caricaturized portrayal of superhero figures. Rather, it provides an imaginary society where anyone who wishes to be a force for good can enter into the superhero universe.

## Conclusion

One of the aims of this project is to envision ways through which scholarship on the intersection of Africana studies and science fiction (comic series) can be engaged to explore anti-racist strategies by which race relations in contemporary society can be improved. Since the audience for comics is a truly multicultural one (just as is the society in which we live) this research becomes important in emphasizing that the superhero fiction universe should be imagined as being more ethnically diverse rather than in the narrow ways in which it has been portrayed within the two major comic book companies (DC Comics and Marvel Comics) in American popular culture (Brown, 1999). To restrict the imaginary of the fantastic accomplishments of superheroes to the surreal world of whiteness then, would be to portray a fabricated vision of what the society we live in looks like. Also, to represent Blackness as an appendage of whiteness in superhero comic series/strips would be to portray a false sense

of white superiority through the symbolic representation of the "superiority" of the white superhero. This is what has been described in this work as a white-privileged model of science fiction that engenders negative models of anti-racist practice.

Thus, by examining how superhero fiction produces negative models (white-privileged) of anti-racist practice, I show how imaginations of "diversity" and "inclusion" can be problematic even with the best of intentions. I also highlight how efforts towards achieving "diversity" within fictional narratives in American popular culture thrive on stereotypical images of African Americans in comic series, as well as the erasure of Blackness from the imaginary and futuristic universe. Ultimately, this work imagines a universe very different from those captured in superhero fiction within popular culture; this is a universe where "diversity" does not need to mean that some super-heroes are more effective or superior than others. Rather, it is an imagined universe where anyone who cares to fight injustice, cruelty, and the exploitation of humanity can become a superhero—a truly inclusive way of imagining the artistic performance in superhero fiction. Using *Brotherman Comics* as a foil, this research work imagines a positive model of anti-racist practice that upholds a broader notion of inclusion than what was found in DC Comics and Marvel Comics. ∎

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

# References

Berger, A. (1971). Comics and culture. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 5(1), 164-178.

Brown, A. (2018). *I'm still here: Black dignity in a world made for whiteness*. New York: Convergent.

Brown, J.A. (1999). Comic book masculinity and the new Black superhero. *African American Review*, 33(1), 25-42.

Carrington, A. M. (2016). *Speculative Blackness: The future of race in science fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chambliss, J.C. (2012, May 19). Superhero comics: Artifacts of the U.S. experience. Paper presented at the sequential smart art conference on teaching with Comics. *Juniata Voices*.

Coleman, M.N., Chapman, S., & Wang, D.C. (2012). An examination of color-blind racism and race related stress among African American undergraduate students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 20(10), 1-19.

Coleman, R.M. (2019). Foreword. The stars are ours: infinite diversities in science fiction & fantasy. *Cushing Memorial Libraries & Archives*.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge.

Cook, M.P. (2017). Using superheroes to visually and critically analyze comics, stereotypes, and society. *Sane Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*, 2(2), 1-32.

Ellison, R. 1953. (1994). Twentieth-century fiction and the Black mask of humanity. In A. Mitchell (Ed.), *Within the circle: An anthology of African American literary criticism from Harlem renaissance to the present* (pp. 134-148). Durham: Duke University Press.

Facciani, M., Warren, P. & Vendemia, J. (2015). A content-analysis of race, gender, and class in American comic books. *Race, Gender & Class*. 22(3-4), 216-226.

Forman, T.A. (2004). Color-blind racism and racial indifference: The role of racial apathy in facilitating enduring inequalities. In M. Krysan & A. Lewis (Eds.), *The changing terrain of race & ethnicity*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Francis, C. (2015). American truths: Blackness and the American superhero. In F. Gateward & J. Jennings (Eds.), *The blacker the ink: Constructions of Black identity in comics and sequential art* (pp. 137-152). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

## **References,** continued

Gateward, F. & Jennings, J. (2015). The Blacker the ink: Constructions of black identity in comics and sequential art. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Howard, S.C. & Jackson, R.L. (2013). Black comics: An introduction. In S.C. Howard & R.L. Jackson (Eds.) Black comics: *Politics of race and representation* (pp. 1-8). London: Bloomsbury.

Howard, S.C. (2017). *Encyclopedia of Black Comics*. Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing.

Hunt, W. (2019). Negotiating new racism: 'It's not racist or sexist. It's just the way it is.' *Media, Culture and Society*, 4(1), 86-103.

Hutton, Z. (2016). I am curious (publishers): Lois Lane, reprints, and unintentional ignorance. *Women Writers About Comics*. https://womenwriteaboutcomics. com/2016/01/lois-lane-i-am-curious-black-and-unintentional-ignorance/ Accessed on July 4, 2023.

Inge, M. T. (1990). *Comics as Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. New York: One World.

Lee, S. (1993). *Night Thrasher*, 1(1) August 1993. Published by Marvel Comics.

Lopes, P. (2006). Culture and stigma: Popular culture and the case of comic books. *Sociological Forum*. 21(3), 387-414.

McAteer, J. (2015). The gospel according to Marvel. *Christian Research Journal*, 38(3), 1-9.

McGrath, K. (2007). Gender, race, and latina identity: An examination of marvel comics' amazing fantasy and Araña. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 15(4), 268-283.

Nama, A. (2011). *Super black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Okorafor, N. (2017). *Binti: home*. New York: Tom Doherty Books.

Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Levin, S. (2006). Social dominance theory and the dynamics of intergroup relations: Taking stock and looking forward. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 17, 271-320.

Reynolds, R. (1992). *Super heroes: A modem mythology*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Royal, D. P. (2007). Coloring America: Multi-ethnic engagements with graphic narrative. *Melus*, 32(3), 7-22.

**Unbounding the Black Imago**, continued

## **References,** continued

Singer, M. (2002). "Black skins" and white masks: Comic books and the secret of race. *African American Review*, 36(1), 107-119.

Stein, D., Meyer, C. & Edlich, M. (2011). Introduction: American comic books and graphic novels. *American Studies*, 56(4), 501-529.

Sullivan, S. (2014). *Good white people: The problem with middle-class white anti-racism*. New York: SUNY press.

Warren, M.R. (2010). *Fire in the heart: How white activists embrace racial justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wright, B.W. (2001). *Comic Book Nation: The transformation of youth culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

# Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*

**Andrew Nyongesa**

**Abstract:** Literary critics have subjected Nuruddin Farah's literary oeuvre to diverse readings focusing on, for example, post-colonialism, feminism and psychological factors. His creation of real settings within a corrupt dictatorial regime aimed at denunciation of poor governance in Somalia has hooked him to the realism typical of the post-colonial novel in Africa. Nonetheless, a keen study of some of Farah's novels exhibits nonrealism, fantasy, magic, prophecies, unconventional religion and sexuality, all of which are elements of speculative fiction. Aside from the unconventional exploration of sex through queer acts consigned to the private space in most African societies, Farah inverts traditional gender roles. This article is a departure from the conventional reading of Farah's work as a realistic representation of Somalia. The article looks at uncanny characters, magic, apocalyptic visions, queerness and other fantastic elements of speculative fiction in Farah (1998) as satirical embellishments that express warnings of the collapse of the Somali State.

**Keywords:** African Literature, Magic, Moral Corruption, Otherworldliness, Speculative Fiction

*Secrets* explores the intricacies of interpersonal connections and individual pasts. The book situates Kalaman's identity quest within conflicting forces of Somalia's globalization

*Jebila and Jusbell (2023)*

The relegation of speculative and science fiction to a position of less respect than other literature is undoubtedly palpable in the world in general and East Africa in particular. Most literary critics consider it a genre surfeited with sheer fantasy and devoid of any connection to the socio-political realities facing communities. Le Guin (1979) for instance uses "Mrs Brown" to represent a member of the marginalized group whose plight speculative fiction writers are unable to articulate because they are engrossed in grandiose fantasy describing spaceships in the Milky Way. In Le Guin's view, stories about ogres, ghosts, and spaceships in the sky typical of African folklore and Western science fiction do not address the realities people face in society. Going by this perspective, the readership would be alienated from a novel that delves into characters' mysterious acts such as Farah's *Secrets*. The major characters such as Sholoongo, Madoobe and Fidow possess mystic powers that they exploit to perform magical and bizarre acts beyond human comprehension. The heroine Sholoongo can find her way into her

colleagues' bedrooms without any physical appearance, disguise herself as wild animals to venture into people's dreams and morph herself into ferocious wild animals to attack her enemies. Madoobe has mystic abilities to converse, woo, and have sex with animals, and Fidow can entice crocodiles to coexist with humans. The odd acts with regards to sex among characters in the novel transgress the moral blueprint in Farah's cultural setting.

Some literary critics would rather ignore the magical and uncanny elements of Farah's _Secrets_ and focus on the political and social realities of East Africa. Jebila and Jusbell (2023) are among critics who elude the nexus between speculative elements and the political predicament of Somalia in Farah's _Secrets_ and instead focus on the protagonist's identity quest amidst the cultural and political predicament of Somalia. In the same vein, Wright (2004) analyses Farah's _Secrets_ as his characteristic depiction of the role of the family in the politics of the nation (7). Wright shoves aside the magic and otherworldliness in the story; there are however emerging voices that find fault in the dismissal of speculative fiction.

Atwood (2011) contends that there is a distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction and associates the latter with socio-political realities; she writes:

> What I mean by 'science fiction' is those books that descend from H.G. Wells's The War of the Worlds, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to earth in metal cannisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, 'speculative fiction' means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn't when the authors wrote the books. (p. 6)

In Atwood's perspective, the substance of speculative fiction is not farfetched fantasy, but socio-political realities in a society. This study evades Le Guin's postulation and adopts Atwood's definition of speculative fiction as literature with stories about actions that can happen in the social and political aspects of real life. Unlike Le Guin, Atwood's definition allows for writing concerning things that might happen "but just hadn't when" Farah, for instance, wrote _Secrets_. The novel is set a few weeks before the military coup in Somalia that rendered the nation stateless for almost two decades. Concerning Nabutanyi's use of the phrase "science fiction", Burger (2020) prefers "speculative fiction" with regard to the African strain as it "encompasses a long tradition of African literature (including oral literature) dealing with the wondrous and imagined" (p. 2). Indeed, in spite of its events and characters being "wondrous" they are about social and political realities in the African societies. This study however questions Burger's conclusion that speculative fiction is "queer or amenable

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

to be utilized to queer ends" (Burger, 2020, p.3). Rather than elevate queerness as the end in itself, Farah utilizes speculative fiction to satirize a "religious" society that transgresses the beliefs it claims to profess through diverse acts of decadence. "This focus for Farah's treatment of Somalian society seems in accord with the notion that decadence contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire and should serve as a warning to present generations" (Malik 2019, p. 33).

Merril (1971) defines speculative fiction as "stories whose objective is to explore, discover by means of projection, hypothesis [...] about the nature of the universe, of man and reality" (p. 60). For Merril, the writers' use of "fancy" does not alienate the story from the immediate realities in the society. Steenkamp (2011) supports Merril's argument that the use of hyperbole notwithstanding, speculative novels cannot be removed from their specific socio-historical contexts "often serving as due warnings to societies regarding possible future crises" (Steenkamp, 2011, p. 7) that could result from their current political, historical, cultural, moral [my emphasis] and economic trajectories. In other words, Steenkamp suggests that the religious hypocrisy and unconventional sexuality in Farah's *Secrets* cannot be divorced from the political disintegration of Somalia. The heroine's irresistible sexual wiles that she uses to defile minors and the use of persistent magic among elders serve as warnings of the impending collapse of Somalia rather than plain fantasy with minimal "meaning" to be shoved aside. Jackson (1981) refers to this direct reference to the text as placement of speculative fiction in its context. She writes:

> *The forms taken by any fantastic text are determined by a number of forces...recognition of those forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinates as well as to a literary tradition of fantasy [...] (p. 3)*

In Jackson's view, literary critics should place the queerness and magic of Farah's *Secrets* within the context of the Islamic beliefs in the setting and his history as a social critic of Somalia. If indeed the dictator and his henchmen hold true to the Islamic creed, why should violation of sexual morals and Islamic monotheism pervade every nook of the Somali society in Farah's novel? This study takes a different trajectory from contemporary conversations on speculative fiction in the African context. While Afrofuturism and African futurism employ "technoculture and science fiction as lens for understanding the Black experience" (Otiku, 2021, p. 75), Farah ignores technological aspects to focus on the mystic and sexual oddity of his characters against the background of their Islamic faith. Otiku expounds that Okorafor's African futurism demonstrates

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

how "a technologically advanced Africa has overcome many of its currently daunting challenges and is enjoying the benefits of socio-economic and political development" (Otiku, 2021, p. 76 ). Farah, on the other hand, predicts the fall of a modern African state that stems from moral depravity and religious hypocrisy.

This study therefore relies on other strands of speculative fiction for effective analysis of Farah's *Secrets*. Steenkamp (2011), for instance, avers that speculative fiction "reflects an exaggerated and sometimes quite literally monstrous form, the fears, hopes and preoccupation of a culture" (p. 10). The fantastic characters that have power to violate all morals and desecrate conventional religion like Farah's are, in Steenkamp's view, overstatements and grotesque forms that embody the realities affecting Somalia. Farah therefore suggests that Somalis have strayed from religious and moral precepts that held the society together by compromising with contradicting values as symbolized by the uncanny characters. Although the characteristic fantasy has impelled some critics to denote speculative writing as foolishness, Sterling (1995) opines:

> If poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, speculative writers are the court jesters. We are the wise fools who can leap, caper, utter prophecies and scratch ourselves in public. We play with Big Ideas because of the garish motley

> *of our pulp origins makes us seem harmless. (p. 9)*

Sterling compares writers who delve into otherworldliness, such as Farah, with dabbling comedians who possess freedoms to utter the vulgar without victimisation. They are hence "wise fools" that express serious subjects because their "pulp" (worthless medium of speculative fiction) gives them immunity. In other words, literary writers choose otherworldliness and uncanny characters to express sensitive subjects that would otherwise invite perilous condemnation. Indeed, Swift successfully attacked the pride in the royal family through creation of another world in Gulliver's Travels called Lilliput. Through the eyes of uncanny creatures called Yahoos and Houyhnhnms, Swift effectively satirises Hobbesian philosophy and rationalism respectively.

Griffin (1994) observes that there is a nexus between otherworldliness and satire; the artist opts for the most appropriate form to attack human folly obliquely. He writes:

> *Satirists are released from certain restraints-about violating particular truths or fairness, about exaggerations or bias or evidence whether in drawing or applying character. They have a licence to lie. Yet they do not simply create a world of make-believe. The excitement of satire (its bite) is based on our knowledge that the*

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

*victims are real, even if we cannot always identify them. Our interpretative task as readers is not simply to identify victims, but the principles of selection and distortion that shape the satirist's 'facts' and ideological bias, perhaps invisible to the satirist - that undergirds the enterprise. (p.132)*

Griffin views the satirists as the authentic owners of poetic license, which permits them to lie to the world, but it responds by applause instead of denunciation. Swift's description of Britain (Lilliput) as a country with a six-inch man as the tallest giant whose head touches the sun is a blatant lie that is received with laughter rather than condemnation. The victims in this episode are the tyrannical Lilliputian King, George I, who ruled England between 1714 and 1727. The Lilliputian empress is Queen Anne, who blocked Swift's advancement in the Church of England. For Griffin, it does not suffice to identify these victims, but unearth Swift's yardsticks in selecting the uncanny Lilliputians and their ideological prejudices. It is apparent that as a Christian, Swift looked with contempt at the King's pride and prevalent philosophies that placed humankind at the center of creation. At Laputa, Swift depicts the Church's contempt for science during the scientific revolution. In short, the otherworldliness is the vehicle by which Swift uses his Christian ideology to mock the secular philosophies of his time.

Swift's example is quite similar to Farah's in *Secrets* because of the religio-political settings in their novels. Farah's ideological mould affects the selection of characters and subjects in *Secrets*. As in Swift, the dictator referenced is a disguised real one (in most of Farah's novels it is Siad Barre), who declared Farah persona non grata in Somalia after the publication of A Naked Needle in 1976. How does this influence Farah's choice of form in a novel set two weeks before the fall of the modern Somalian state? As a Somali Muslim who has maintained his identity in spite of exile, how does this affect his view of Barre's socialistic regime in Somalia?

Published in 1998, Farah's *Secrets* is a story of Kalaman and his childhood lover, Sholoongo. Born a *duugan*, a child to be buried, Sholoongo was abandoned in the bush by her mother, but mysteriously adopted by a lioness and raised. When Sholoongo reappeared in the village, the guilty mother resorted to suicide. In her father's custody, Sholoongo falls in love with the young Kalaman, which worries his mother because Sholoongo has powers to alter herself into an animal and invade people's dreams as a ratel (badger), elephant, and hippo. Worse still are her sex morals; she has an affair with Kalaman, his father Yaqut, and attempts to have sex with her grandfather, Nonno. She also has sex with her half-brother Timir and many others. Sholoongo departs to the Americas where she refines

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

her uncanny personality by training in Shamanism. Kalaman goes to college and trains as a computer programmer. As he starts wooing Talaado in preparation for marriage, Sholoongo reappears at his apartment with odd demands to have a child by him. Kalaman is tormented by Sholoongo's mysterious reappearance, wondering how she knew his residence. Talaado gets a hint of her presence and storms out of the house, but Sholoongo vanishes. Kalaman's mother, who has always detested Sholoongo, vows to shoot her. Kalaman drives to Afgoi, his grandfather's home, to seek his guidance. He is shocked to realize that, after leaving her apartment, Sholoongo spent time in Kalaman's room at the grandfather's house. Kalaman probes to understand the mystery behind his name, and his mother's hatred for Sholoongo. Nonno refuses to unravel the affair between Yaqut and Sholoongo, but Damac in a separate chapter reveals that desperate for a child, Yaqut made love to Sholoongo and she conceived. Damac then forced her to have an abortion. Depressed by the current turn of events, Kalaman drives to see Arbaco, his mother's friend, and in an ensuing conversation, she reveals that Kalaman is not his presumed father's biological son. His mother, Damac, had fallen prey to a marriage racket that intended to marry her off to a man she neither loved nor knew. The marriage certificate was falsely signed, but she firmly refused to give in. The unscrupulous gang

wreaked a revenge in which Damac was abducted and gang-raped. Pregnant and unsure of the next move, she turned to Arbaco, the "floater" whose networking brought along Yaqut. He married Damac unconventionally to save her dignity and that of the child. Devastated by the news that she is the "issue of gang-rape," he goes to ascertain the truth from Yaqut and concludes that although the Somali say that mothers matter most, men like Yaqut matter too. He hugs his adoptive father and cries. He makes a resolution to love his parents and marry Talaado. Sholoongo sneaks into Nonno's house, persuades him to make love and flees. The story ends with Nonno's death.

This article is a departure from the conventional reading of Farah's work as a realist representation of Somalia. It also breaks away from contemporary conversations that read African literature in the context of technoculture or entirely queer space and adopts Atwood's perspective that considers speculative literature as reflective of imminent socio-political realities. This study looks at uncanny characters, magic, apocalyptic visions, queerness and other fantastic elements of speculative fiction in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets* as satirical embellishments that express warnings of the collapse of the Somalia state. The major finding of the study is that Farah's *Secrets* adopts otherworldliness and exaggeration to satirize the hypocrisy and moral depravity that herald the collapse of Somalia as a

**Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued**

nation-state. The writer suggests that Somalia will only survive if the people shun moral blindness and restore sincere religion.

## Otherworldliness and Parody of Moral Depravity: Queerness and Abandonment of the Sexual Blueprint

> There is no sin more serious after shirk than fornication.
>
> *—Abdurahman Abdulkarim Al-Sheha*

According to the International Religious Freedom Report (2017) 99% of the Somali population is Sunni Muslim, a cultural background that according to Jackson should not be ignored by literary critics in order to give speculative novels such as Farah's *Secrets* a valid interpretation. Referring to the Quran, alSheha (2020) delves into the Islamic doctrine on sex upon which Farah, unlike Swift who turns to Christianity, stands to satirize moral depravity in his society. For Griffin, the Islamic teaching is to Farah "the principles of selection and distortion that shape the satirist's 'facts' and ideological bias, perhaps invisible" (Griffin, 1994, p.132) to Farah himself. It is evident that the study may not seek Farah's assent as having applied Islamic tenets as he may have, unconsciously, turned to them. In Islam, deviation from sexual morals is only second to blasphemy and invites Allah's punishment. This section will adopt Atwood's ideas to demonstrate Farah's parodying of political ineptitude and religious

hypocrisy through violation of sexual morals and the subsequent collapse of the Somalia state. According to Atwood, writers of speculative fiction comment on all facets of society, and begin with politics. She says, "[p]olitics in the sense of who has the power and how people behave. That's what politics is and that is also what novel writing is about" (Brien, 1987, p. 176). In other words, Farah's creation of a strange world is a vehicle to comment on moral decadence and subsequent political ineptitude in his mother nation. The nexus between decadence and political decline is an historical allusion from the fall of Roman Empire (Malik 2019, p. 33) that finds ground in the setting of the novel.

Farah effectively parodies sexual depravity through creation of uncanny characters such as Sholoongo, Fidow and Nonno. The character Sholoongo, right from her birth, embodies the advent of evil to hasten the community descent into moral violations and invite Allah's wrath. Nonno says of her:

> *I gather that Sholoongo was delivered of her mother when the stars were bivouacking at a most inauspicious station. She was born a duugan, that is to say a baby to be buried. And that was what her mother tried to do; she carried the infant out into the bush and abandoned her there. But Sholoongo survived and lived to*

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

*haunt the villagers conscience, especially her mother's. (Farah,1998, p. 2)*

The specific circumstances that prompt Sholoongo's mother to describe her as duugan are not specified, but the spiritual world was possibly provoked to let such an ill- fated child to be born. Given the belief in the conduct of the parents on the fortunes of the children in most traditional African religions, Sholoongo's father is introduced as one of the transgressors of the Islamic and traditional Somali philosophy on sex. The ancestors give children to the living and punish members of the community who transgress the moral code (Pobee 1976). Kalaman witnesses Sholoongo's father, Madoobe, seducing a cow in a coded language. Kalaman says:

*Now his nakedness (Madoobe) was prominent with an erection. In a moment, he was standing behind a heifer, saying something his voice even. The nearer I got to him and the young cow, the clearer his voice was, only I couldn't decipher, his words, maybe because he was speaking to the cow in a coded tongue […] was he appeasing the cow's beastly instincts by talking to her in a secret language? A little later and after a lengthy invocation, he inserted his erection in the heifer, still talking but also breathing hard. (Farah, 1998, p. 17)*

Throughout the sexual act there is constant communication between Madoobe and the cow to emphasize the other-worldliness. In fact, when Kalaman raises the issue with family members, they accuse him of having misconstrued the "symbolic nature of the ritual" (Farah, 1998, p. 17) since the heifer was a spirit of sorts. Arbaco demystifies this and frankly tells Kalaman that Madoobe had the habit of having sex with animals: cows, hens, ostriches; but when he tried a female donkey, it kicked him to death. She says, "[h]e was found stark nude, on his back, his thing at half-mast, half an erection you might say. But dead all the same," (Farah, 1998, p. 224). If illicit sex with human persons is such an offense in Islamic creed as alSheha (2020) observes, how terrible are Madoobe's deeds of having it with animals? alSheha adds, "Islam does not allow fulfilling one's sexual desire in an uncontrolled animalistic manner" (p. 7). Muslims who persist in violating this invite Allah's punishment. Perhaps this is the reason why Madoobe sires a duugan.

When Sholoongo's mother throws her away, she is raised by a lioness and returns. The mother commits suicide upon setting her eyes on her child. Right from her youth, Sholoongo transgresses the Islamic code on sex and is endowed with mysterious powers to enable her to accomplish the mission. Sholoongo has sex with her half-brother, Timir without any reprimand from her father—who

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

practiced bestiality. Kalaman's father says, "[t]hey were always doing it, right under their father's eyes" (Farah, 1998, p.70). According to Islamic teaching, parents should separate children of different sexes by the age of ten to prevent any sexual temptations (alSheha, 2020, p.13). Madoobe and Yaqut ignore this responsibility.

Sholoongo starts an affair with Kalaman without any restraint from parents. At eight, he sneaks in Sholoongo's bed and asks, "[i]f she could find some cavity for it (penis) to dip its head" (Farah, 1998, p. 8). Whereas Islam forbids watching anything that arouses one sexually (alSheha, 2020, p. 16), Kalaman has never been guided. He hides in Nonno's room to observe his sexual act with an Afro-American woman. His affair with Sholoongo is conducted in a manner that violates every sense of taboo; Sholoongo feeds him on her monthly periods. As much as Nonno advises that Kalaman is to blame, none of the adults have trained Kalaman on how a Muslim young man should grow up. Yaqut, Kalaman's father, is so infatuated with Sholoongo that they have sex. Damac says that "it was no longer a guarded secret that she (Sholoongo) came very close to of keeping her pledge to Kalaman by offering him a sibling. She became pregnant with Yaqut's child" (Farah, 1998, p. 181). It is clear that there is no sense of taboo or morality in Kalaman's family when father and son have sex with same woman. Later Sholoongo goes out for Nonno at the river

to seduce him into sex, but Nonno kicks her to signify his integrity. Nonno represents the last vestiges of integrity in a disintegrating Somalia. To underscore the gravity of the depravity, Kalaman wonders how the relationship would have been if Sholoongo had had a child with himself, Yaqut, and Grandfather Nonno?

Sholoongo's departure to the Americas only serves to heighten her unconventional sexuality. Whereas Islamic teaching forbids watching and listening to anything that stimulates one sexually, Yaqut says of Sholoongo, "[m]ark you, she is as cheap as a popular rag dishing out pornography in the sophisticated idiom of a highbrow programme" (Farah, 1998 p. 69). As Griffin suggests, the writer's description of Sholoongo's Shamanism is "a lie" meant to distract the reader's attention from the real issues bedevilling Somalia: moral depravity and hypocrisy. In a note that Kalaman stumbles on, Sholoongo has had queer sex escapades in America. He reads:

> *He associated food with sex and would invariably ask if I had eaten or if I would like to. He was perverse taking relish in the sound of munching food, claiming that this turned him on. Food before sex. He would then drag me to secret corner, to whisper an earful of obscenities. He would boast about his voyeuristic exploits: a man mounting a woman from behind; an African American*

*woman taking the manhood of her landlord in her mouth [...]. At some point, he wondered what the blood of the menses would taste like...I encouraged him to try it... 'Not bad,' he said having tasted it. Then I told him (I learnt this from my father, who was well travelled because he was a sea man) that there were some countries whose people called woman's blood red milk. (Farah, 1998, pp. 82-83)*

This note confirms that Sholoongo's queerness descends from her father, Madoobe, who absolutely has no interest in the Islamic path taken by his community. alSheha (2020) observes that Islam forbids sexual relations between couples when the wife is having menses. He adds that the husband should only penetrate the wife through the vagina. During menses, women are exempted from fasting as they are deemed to be unclean. Sholoongo with her boyfriend Kalaman in this passage transgress these norms by embracing an alien culture that encourages people to feed on menses and engage in oral sex.

Sholoongo's stepbrother, Timir, is no exception; aside from having sex with her, he violates the culture of the people by persistently having sex with men. According to Islamic teaching, "[t]wo men should not lay naked under one garment. Two women should not lay naked under one garment" (alSheha 2020, p. 16). In spite of existing conversations between

traditionalists and contemporary scholars concerning the legitimacy of same-sex marriages in Islam, neo-orthodox legal scholars whose tenets dominate Sunni Islam maintain that to be gay is to transgress Islamic sharia (Zollner 2011). Sholoongo reports that Timir is an active member of an American gay movement and he has returned to "buy a woman, preferably one with an infant, who out of gratitude for his wealth... is prepared to slave for him and his artsy boyfriend in San Francisco in a threesome set up" (Farah 1998, p. 37). Since his gay marriage cannot produce an offspring, the idea is to buy a Somali woman with a child to work for them as they enjoy their gay marriage in the United States. The inversion of heterosexual marriage does not just affect young men like Timir.

It is Fidow's habit to use his magical powers to practice diverse sexual acts, which transgress the Islamic norm. Farah describes him as a man with secret charms that seduce female crocodiles to kill or mate. Kalaman says:

*In an instant, Fidow would be issuing a bellow similar to that of a bull (crocodile) preparing to mate. And as if on cue, the female crocodile would open her mouth and make a throaty sound which, as Fidow had explained to me was that of a female responding to a bull's lusty advances. Stark naked now, except for an immense amulet dangling from the upper part*

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

*of his arm…he moved toward the aroused crocodile…I shared a gossip with Timir (Farah, 1998, p. 60).*

The ability to seduce a female crocodile is the otherworldliness that Farah creates to satirize moral depravity in the community. Those readers confounded by Madoobe's habit of mating with heifers are dumbfounded at Fidow's magical powers to seduce and have sex with crocodiles as violent as they are. These overstatements demonstrate the destruction of sexual morals in Somalia and their impending consequences. The following day, Kalaman sees Fidow and Timir having sex in the river. Because of the attitude that environment plays a pertinent role in the development of homosexuality1, Farah describes Timir's sexual act with Fidow in a satirical way . He writes: "[i]t was early in the morning. Their bodies clinched together like dogs, Fidow behind, Timir in front and half bent, Fidow in-and-out-motion, Timir submissive" (Farah, 1998, pp. 61-62). Fidow's acts are uncharacteristic of a Somali Muslim elder like Nonno, who takes the responsibility of guiding the youth against breaking taboos and upholding responsible sexual behaviour. Instead of dissipating his sexual desire through marriage (alSheha, 2020), Fidow keeps many mistresses. Kalaman says that in the forest near the river, "Fidow had taken Timir…night after night, I sneaked in on men and women engaged in illicit lovemaking. Fidow, a Casanova, had many mistresses" (Farah, 1998, p. 98). Indeed,

as Griffin suggests, the writer tends to leave out the mystic aspects of Fidow and focuses on the moral quagmire that Somalia confronts. The choice of the word "Casanova" plainly shows the writer's contempt for moral depravity in this society. Kalaman, destitute of Islamic guidance on sex, continues to watch things that are forbidden (alShelah 2020).

Aside from Sholoongo, there are female characters who contribute to the violation of Islamic teaching on sex and marriage. The narrator refers to these women as "floaters" and although, at face value, the writer begins with praise for them, underlying it is terse criticism. He writes:

*Floaters serve an integral part of Somali society's self-regulating mechanism. They are no saints, but cynical women, divorcees or widows, women on the margins of respectability, courtesans with loyalty only to their own self-interest. They operate in full knowledge of what they are doing, mistrustful of both men and women, and sceptical at the sanctity of matrimony. Secretive operatives, they hold no faith in the future or in the prospect of a handsome prince who arrives in disguise with the frog's face. (Farah, 1998, p. 213).*

There is no difference between Fidow's self-serving greed and the morals of floaters since they are portrayed as "cynical," sceptical at "sanctity of marriage"

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

and solely loyal to their "self-interests." They therefore make a weighty contri-bution towards violation of the moral code, particularly the Islamic one that is professed by the majority of Somalis. alSheha observes, "[t]he prophet forbade secluding oneself with a woman. For a man may fall prey to Satanic desires" (alSheha 2020, p. 17), but Arbaco, the floater in Mogadishu, arranges private dates between men and women to have sex from her hut. She connects others to government officials to have sex or get favours. After facilitating the meeting of a man and woman in her hut, "[s]he would make herself scarce, and come to call on my father and myself. Men demanded. She provided. Everybody was happy all the time," (Farah, 1998, p. 213). The happiness in this episode is possibly meant sarcas-tically because most of the girls that paid her a visit ended up with unwanted preg-nancies. Arbaco herself ended up with a daughter and could not marry, which is a violation of the Islamic faith. Her queer matchmaking ends up ruining Yaqut's marriage life. She encourages him to marry Damac after she is gang-raped and Nonno is surprised that his son marries "without a vow of nikaax in the presence of a sheikh" (Farah, 1998, pp. 132-133). Later he comes to realize that Damac was pregnant because of the gang rape.

In spite of Yaqut's good intentions to assist Damac who had been forced into an unfair situation, the subsequent barren-ness in their marriage and his desperation for children to the extent of falling prey to Sholoongo signifies the writer's contempt for his action. After weaning Kalaman, Damac becomes barren and in spite of the sexual vitality, they do not have a child. Damac represents Somalia, a nation rendered barren by the deliberate moral corruption and violation of divine statutes.

Nonno is, to a large extent, portrayed as the only man standing, but he also vio-lates the Islamic norms and is punished. He tells Kalaman, "[w]e go back to my teens when I was growing up in the city of Berbera in the North and learning to be a Koranic scholar" (Farah, 1998, p. 276). He was being trained as Muslim scholar when he transgressed Islamic norms and had to "flee a communal rage" (p. 276). Henceforth, he caught an eye disease and had to take new vows not to repeat the mistake or suffer blindness. Nonno strives to maintain his integrity to avoid further punishment. When Sholoongo makes advances on him at the river early in the morning, he kicks her in the mouth (p.139) and she has to flee. Kalaman has reverence for him as he turns to him for guidance when Sholoongo appears. He tells Kalaman:

> *I believe that a balance must be struck between what is permitted and what is not. This is how an ethos is established, how taboos are formu-lated. Thou shall not kill. This is my wife, therefore...! This is my daughter*

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

*in law therefore…![…] we reason, we construct a mechanism of self restraints, of guides, we construct further constraints into our logic of being. Not to be misled by our primordial instincts […] (Farah, 1998, p. 202).*

Having been punished for violating the requirements of the Islamic religion, Nonno has learnt the importance of abiding by the moral code or what he calls taboos. In other words, he does not expect Kalaman to have a child with Sholoongo since his adoptive father Yaqut impregnated her in the past. Such moral principles in his opinion distinguish humans from animals and a society that transgresses such norms is on the verge of extinction. He insists that the social fabric cannot exist without a sense of right and wrong and "when crowds, advancing the interest of the clan or fighting in the name of one, turn into a mob… kill and kill…then were entering an area of taboo, of things not done under normal circumstances" (202). Nonno in this assertion draws a nexus between the collapse of Somalia state to moral corruption. In his view, it is the violation of existing taboos based on the Islamic and African morals that triggers the sudden collapse of the Government.

Farah suggests that although the individual may have the capacity to go against the grain, they are easily influenced by the fashionable trends to compromise their

ideals. Nonno's integrity is short-lived as Sholoongo makes a final stab to have illicit sex with him and he gives in. Nonno accounts for this act in a conversation with Kalaman:

*She (Sholoongo) slipped into my bed … and I let her. I thought to myself that in a world turned upside down, in which brothers are gathering deadly weapons to kill brothers, a world with no sense of morality, a society with no sense of taboos, no knowing where we are ending up and what has become of us—I asked myself, is it worth my while to remain true to my moral sense, when no one is? (Farah, 1998, p. 294).*

In this speech, the writer confirms that his real intention in the creation of the otherworld (as Griffin suggests) is to highlight the consequence of the moral filth in society. The murder, just like sexual debauchery, is a violation of the moral code and the Islamic doctrine they profess. Farah suggests that having sex with a heifer or a crocodile violates sexual morals whether one links it to magic or not. Killing serves the same purpose whether the perpetrator associates it with the enemy clan or not. The death of Nonno after the illicit sex with Sholoongo signifies the final nail in the coffin of moral sanity and onset of Allah's punishment; hence the collapse of the Somalia state and onset of chaos.

**Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued**

## Magic and Spiritual Secrets: The Beginning of the End of Somalia

> [...]Prompted God to send the flood... for they knew all the secrets of Angels and possessed the hateful power of demons, the power of magic.
>
> —*(The Holy Quran 2:102)*

The practice of performing mysterious acts forms the cornerstone of issues in Farah's *Secrets*. The speculative attribute of otherworldliness is projected through magic and mysteries that, as Griffin suggests, comprise the satirical frame of this genre of fiction. Like moral deprivation, Farah uses magic to mock the folly that will bring his community to a tragic end. Belcher (2007) defines magic as inexplicable physical phenomena and associates serious writers who write such works with magical realism. He considers it as a style in which "the fabulous is detailed, the supernatural meets the everyday and the ordinary and the extraordinary are presented as analogous" (Becher, 2007, p. 25). Giving the Biblical example of Balaam and the Hebrew God, Belcher avers that magical realism "emerges out of the dominator and dominated" (Belcher 2007, p. 26) with Balaam as the former and the donkey as the dominated. Belcher concludes that in the Biblical episode "human domination is combated with indigenous knowledge" (p. 26).

Similarly, Salman Rushdie, cited from Belcher (2007) asserts, "[m]agical realism comes from elevating the village world view above the urban one" (p. 27). Farah adopts magical realism to satirize the dominator-dominated situation during the Siad Barre regime (p. 27); he uses the village view to challenge Barre's modern state. It is the village's perspective that Barre's regime has led Somali community away from Islamic precepts, which has provoked Allah's punishment. Belcher avers that "magical realism is rooted in politics and is a literary form of the colonized," (p. 26). The "colonized" in Farah's context are Somali citizens that suffer under Barre's oppression. Farah's real target is Barre's regime that persistently insisted on a kind of socialism, which crowned him a god over the people. In previous texts, the General (Barre) is given a silent and unseen presence, similar to a deity's (Hawley, 1996). The use of magic in Farah's *Secrets* is just a style to extend his criticism of a regime. Belcher adds, "[c]ritics split the two-part term (magical realism) into negative and positive halves to be used as a binary weapon with which to attack the wedded realities of colonial or postcolonial life," (p. 27). The "magical" is therefore negatively used to attack Barre's regime that has led Somalia away from Islamic creed. However, in "the magical-realist binary, the magical is not always aligned to indigenous beliefs" (Belcher, p. 27), which is in league with Farah's *Secrets* since the magic arising from pre-Islamic Somalia is viewed as transgression of conventional religion (Islam); the magical serves the ends of Islamic faith.

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

The title *Secrets* is a religious allusion to the wicked angels that provoked God to punish the human race by sending the Flood. In the Apocalypse of Enoch the angels Harut and Marut left heaven and mingled with humanity. "They went on to reveal to humans what they ought not to have known" (Holy Quran 2: 102). Allah had to send the flood to destroy humanity to eliminate supernatural secrets (such as magic) that Harut and Marut had revealed. The flood is symbolised by the collapse of Somalia state. The characters in the novel should therefore be wary of the knowledge of these secrets.

Several characters violate the conventional religion to acquire magical secrets in the novel. Whereas Islamic precepts forbid involvement in magic, the character Fidow is a magician who woos crocodiles for sex. For example, Fidow "blows through a perforated snail shell to alert honeyguides to direct him where hives are hidden" (Farah 1998, p. 59). This mystic ability to communicate with honeyguides transgresses Islamic doctrine, which require Muslims to only communicate to their God and fellow human beings. Nonno is another character whose knack for magic surprises many people when Kalaman is born. He prompts the crow to visit the home. Kalaman says:

*Upon returning to the jalopy vehicle, he had a passenger. Uninvited, a crow was seated in the other front seat, behaving like a house pet [....]. The feathered creature, as a matter of fact greeted him with a quizzical squawk, perhaps wondering why Nonno had not welcomed him. As though offended, the crow vacated the seat he had occupied till then and balanced himself on the metal frame-work of the van. (Farah, 198 p. 158)*

The crow's behaviour in this passage is quite similar to that of a person with ability to think and communicate. It has come to celebrate the birth of Kalaman and name him. When Nonno arrives home, the crow alights and is excited to see the baby. Kalaman avers that the crow's conduct at the home is a mystery attached to the "pre-Islamic Somalia, a mythical creature elevated to the status of a deity," (Farah 1998, p. 159). In Shelah's perspective, Nonno's action of welcoming the crow is shirk, or idolatry, the worst contravention of the conventional religion. The crow makes a loud squawk that sounds like "kalaman," and Nonno, out of reverence for it names the baby Kalaman. As Yaqut (the adoptive father) celebrates, griots arrive in large numbers to chant blessings. The crow is the clan totem that is revered as an alternative deity in Nonno's clan. When Kalaman does not cry, Nonno places a tamarind seed on its lips, "which stirred, opened, tongue out and then in [...]" (Farah 1998, p. 162). He then places wild honey to its lips and administers a tamarind drink and the baby bursts out crying. Kalaman concludes that Nonno is a magician who did not want

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

to reveal his secrets, as they formed the most essential component of his livelihood. In other words, Nonno practised magic to earn his living.

The character whose magical acts embody evil and pave the way for the "flood" and collapse of the nation is Sholoongo. Her father, Madoobe, violated Islamic sex norms through secret rituals of sex with cows and she is possibly born to hasten the community's corruption and collapse. Her birth is surrounded by mystery and magic. Having been abandoned by her mother, "[a] lioness adopted and raised her together with her cubs, then abandoned her at crossroads, where some travellers found her. These took her to the nearest settlement, which happened to be her mother's," (Farah 1998, p. 2). When the mother sees Sholoongo, she commits suicide as a punishment for her sins. Her act of abandoning the child is a transgression of Islamic precepts and her husband will have cows for a companion. Although the writer mentions Timir as Sholoongo's half-brother, his mother is absent in the story.

Contrary to the Islamic doctrine, Sholoongo exhibits unparalleled spiritual powers with ability to turn herself into animals and make her way into people's consciousness. In Kalaman's mother's dreams, she is "long nailed and endowed with a stout head, protruding teeth with rounded ears which resemble a ratel's; she is digging forever without a moment's break" (Farah 1998, p. 13). In another dream, Kalaman's mother sees Sholoongo disguised as a honey badger chewing into her viscera . She also exudes alien odours possibly because of the charms she applies to trap those around her. Kalaman says, "when my entire world became all smells: putrid invasions of undomesticated odours; alien scents everywhere in the apartment" (Farah 1998, pp. 25-26). In her childhood, she traps Kalaman into an illicit affair and feeds him on her monthly period.

When she leaves for the United States, she demonstrates distaste for the community's religion by turning to Shamanism. Although Nonno defends her studies because the Shamanic training in the United States "enables her to heal," (Farah 1998, p.141), Yaqut and Damac testify to her bitterness, hate, and moral depravity. Rios (2002) avers that "the altered state is used by the Shaman to predict the future, to experience metaphorically a change in his shape and contact spiritual entities ... to conquer evil ... neutralize witchcraft and restore the client to good health" (p. 1585). According to the Islamic creed, these are magical secrets typical of the wicked angels, Harut and Marut (Surah of the Quran 2: 102). Rios refers to Shamanism as the first religion of humankind, and therefore prohibited by Islamic teaching. True to Rios' observation, Sholoongo alters herself into an elephant to neutralize Fidow's witchcraft that has

### Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

accentuated his queerness and propensity to destroy wild animals. She alters herself into an elephant and tramples Fidow to death; his charms to lure the elephant fail. In reminiscence, Nonno says:

> *Years and years ago...Sholoongo took a walk to the woods a duck trailing her. She and the duck vanished for a good while and when next I set eyes on her, Sholoongo was circling a Rhino. She went on her knees as though in prayer...she fumbled for something in her clothing ... Sholoongo deposited it (note) in the belly of the Rhino.* (Farah 1998, p. 125)

The note mentioned in this passage is the photocopy of the marriage certificate, which the unscrupulous gang had forged to compel Damac into a fake marriage. As much as it was Sholoongo's act of revenge after Damac forced her to abort Yaqut's baby, it exposes the moral decadence of the men who fake marriage certificates in the presence of clerics without religious ideals. When Damac refuses to marry the strange man, they gang-rape her, which is inconsistent to the Islamic creed.

Sholoongo represents a society in the maze of religious and moral muddle whose actions prompt self-destruction. She is Barre's Somalia that had rejected conventional order established by Islamic faith for one thousand four hundred years and turned to indigenous and foreign gods that hasten the community's descent into destruction. Her life is paradoxical as she promises Shamanic healing powers on one hand and tatters the sexual blueprint on the other. Her adoption of Shamanism signifies Barre's turn to Soviet-style socialism. In *Secrets*, Farah suggests that this atheistic philosophy has desecrated Islamic values that held Somalia's social fabric.

From the character Nonno, it is evident that violation of Islamic norms invites punishment. His transgression of norms during the training nearly caused him his sight. Worse still, he had to flee his ancestral land and has lived a lonely wife. His wife died early and when the son comes to marriage, the only grandchild, Kalaman, is the issue of gang-rape. When Sholoongo conceives Yaqut's baby, Damac takes her to an unscrupulous doctor for abortion. Nonno does not have his own blood grandchild because of his violations of the conventional religion. His magic antics are a ruse that do not give him true success or happiness.

## Conclusion

Speculative and science fiction are not sheer fantasy as Le Guin suggests. Like any other literary genre, they address social political realities in the writer's setting. As illustrated above, the use of magic and otherworldliness are Farah's way of satirising religious hypocrisy and moral degeneration typical of Barre's Somalia. True to Griffin and Belcher's view, otherworldliness and magic address

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

the social realities and politics of the work's setting. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, Farah adopts a style that enables him to satirize society without direct references that otherwise would offend the Muslim audiences. This study also challenges Wilber's and similar criticisms that evade all reference to magic and otherworldliness and solely focus on the social and political realities in the novel. Such an approach leaves out the sensitive subjects the artist has opted to embellish in magic and a foreign world. It would be quite irrational to try to unravel Swift's attack on the British royal family without interpreting the myopia and pride among Lilliputians. It is the focus on the character's magic in the context of Islamic attributes of the Somali community and fall of the state that enables the critic to understand Farah's intention. ∎

---

[1]See Mbugua (2015) for the theory that same-sexual behaviour is a genetically evolved trait whose phenotypic expression is triggered by the environment.

## Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued

# References

Atwood, M. (2008). Perfect Storms: Writing Oryx and Crake. https://www.oryxandcrake.co.uk/perfectstorm.esp=47.

Atwood, M. (2011). *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. Virago.

Belcher, W. (2007). Conjuring the Colonizer: Alternative Readings of Magical Realism in Sherman Alexe's *Reservation Blues*. American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 31(2), 00-00.

Brien, O. P. ed., (1987). *So to Speak: Interviews with Contemporary Canadian Writers*. Vehicle Press.

Burger, B. (2020). Engaged Queerness in African Speculative Fiction, Scrutiny 2, 25:2, 1-12, DOI: 10.1080/18125441.2020.185977.

Farah, N. (1998). *Secrets*. Arcade Publishing, Inc. New York.

Griffin, D. (1994). *Satire: A critical Reintroduction*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Hawley, J. (1996). Nuruddin Farah-Tribalism, Orality and Postcolonial Ultimate Reality and Meaning in Contemporary Somalia. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning 19* (3),189-205.

Jabil, J. and Jusbell B. (2023). Political Turmoil and Conflict: A Neo-colonial Study of Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets. Journal of Research Administration 5*(2), 2573-7104.

Jackson, R. (1981). Fantasy: *Fiction of Subversion*. Routledge.

Le Guin, U. (1989). *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Women's Press.

Malik, S. (2019). Decadence and Roman Historiography. In Jane D. & David W. (Eds). *Decadence and Literature* (30-46). Cambridge University Press.

Mbugua, K (2015). Explaining Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: The Stagnation of the Genetic and Evolutionary Research Programs. *Journal for General Philosophy of Science.*46(1): 23-43. doi1 0. 1 007/s 1 0838-0 1 4-9273-5.

McKnight, J. (1997). *Homosexuality, Evolution and Adaptation*. Routledge.

Merril, J. (1971). What do you mean Science Fiction? In *Science Fiction: The Other Side of Realism: Essays in Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Edited by Thomas Clareson, 53-95. Bowling Green: BGUP.

Oku, A. (2021). Africanfuturism and the Reframing of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor. Feminist Africa , 2 (2), 75-89.

Pobee, J. (1976). Aspects of African Traditional Religion. *Sociological Analysis*, 37 (1), 1-18.

**Speculative Fiction and Parody: Moral Corruption, Magic and Collapse of Somalia in Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*, continued**

## References, continued

Rios, M. (2002). What can we learn from Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy with

 Latino Immigrant Clients. *American Journal of Public Health* 92 (10), 576-1585. doi: 10.2105/ajph.92.10.1576

Sherman, A. (2007). Reservation Blues. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 31(2), 00-00.

alSheha, A. ( 2020). Islamic Perspective on Sex. https://www.muslim-library.com.

Somalia (2017) *International Religious Freedom Report*. 29th May 2018. www.ecoi.net

Steenkamp, E. (2011). Identity, Belonging and Ecological Crisis in South African Speculative Fiction. Rhodes University. https://www.core.ac.uk.

Sterling, B. (1995). "Preface." In William G. (ed). *Burning Chrome and other Stories*, 9-13. Harper Collins.

The Holy Quran (1991). Kazi Pubns Inc.

Rios (2002). What We Can Learn From Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy With Latino.

Immigrant Clients. *American Public Health Association*. 92 (10), 1576—1589. Doi: 10.2105/ajph.92.10.1576.

Wright, D. (2004). Private and Public Secrets, Family and State in Nuruddin Farah's Secrets. *Journal of Common Wealth Literature* 39 (2), p. 7-27.

Zollner, B. (2011). Mithliyyun or Lutiyyun? neo-orthodoxy and the debate on the unlawfulness of same-sex relationsinIslam.In: Habib,S. (ed.) *Islamand Homosexuality*. Praeger. http://www.abc-clio.com/product.aspx?isbn=97803133.

# Books in Review

**Lavender, Isiah**

*Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson*

Reviewed by **Sandra Jacobo**

*Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson* continues the legacy of the Literary Conversation Series, a volume of selected interviews with public figures that range from the likes of Steve Martin to Samuel R. Delaney. The editor of this book, Isiah Lavender III, has held a significant role in the development of Black speculative fiction scholarship. A Sterling Goodman Professor of English at the University of Georgia, Lavender has single-authored *Race in Speculative Fiction* (2011) and *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Pre-history of a Movement* (2019). He  has also contributed to the major public discussions concerning Afrofuturism,  and literary discussions that are inclusive of Indigenous, Asian-American and Latine speculative writers with his editing role in *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* (2014), *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction* (2017) and more.

*Conversations* contains 21 interviews with Hopkinson published from 1999 to 2021 across different media and contexts ranging from science fiction magazines to academic journals to previously unpublished interviews with the editor. The

interviews follow different eras in Hopkinson's career closely. The structure of this book includes an introduction written by Lavender with a concluding paragraph of acknowledgements, and a chronological timeline of Nalo's career and life journey. Along with the readers learning more about Hopkinson's life outside of being a speculative fiction writer, this publication presents multiple references to Black feminism, queer of color theory, literary theory, Afrodiasporic cultural commentary, and fandom/popular culture that appear throughout Hopkinson's oeuvre. Throughout these interviews, Hopkinson does not shy away from the tense discussions about the science/speculative fiction genre and its evolution. In fact, in each interview, she speaks out against the misrepresentation and erasure of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) narratives. The interviews together emphasize how conversations on race, class, gender, and sexuality are necessary to the science fiction genre and its growing attention in the academy.

The first three interviews (with *Locus Magazine, African American Review*, and *Strange Horizons*) all occurred from

## **Books in Review**, continued

1999-2000, shortly after Hopkinson's debut book, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, was published in 1998. In these interviews, Hopkinson is considered an emerging voice that reinvigorated interest and attention to science fiction, especially because of its inclusion of a seemingly "fresh" perspective of the Black experience in North America. In these interviews, Hopkinson gives a detailed report of how she was able to publish *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *The Midnight Robber*, as well as the influences and craft of the novels. She also nods to her literary inspiration, Samuel R. Delaney, acknowledging how his presence in the science fiction literary world was seen as an opportunity for Black and POC writers to enter a genre of writing from which they often felt alienated. She states in her interview with Locus Magazine in 1999: "the literature is ... evolving, and there are people who are tackling things like that head-on. But it's still very much a literature that does not include us, except as a window dressing. The overall impression you get from the book covers is that humans are the white people, and the aliens are people of color" (Lavender, 2022, p. 8). In this moment of her career, there is a fascination with use of Caribbean language and tradition that provides the genre and its readers with an opportunity for diverse storytelling and inclusion.

The next six interviews all take place from 2001-2002, and at this point in Hopkinson's career, she is a well-known author whose work is now more commonly discussed in academic spaces. Following in the footsteps of the *African American Review*, Hopkinson is now having discussions with *Callaloo, MaComère*, and *Duke University Press*, as well as science fiction magazines and publications like *Locus Magazine* (again) and *Challenging Destiny*. In these sets of interviews, Hopkinson describes the use of her own iteration and blending of Caribbean English, which is a common thread throughout many of her interviews in this collection, but she also highlights more SF writers of color. She interrogates generic delineations in her interview with *Challenging Destiny*, where she ponders on why books like Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* are often not classified as fantasy or science fiction, which reinforces "the notion that people of color don't write SF" (Lavender, 2022, p.58).

The next three interviews spanning 2005-2008 display a period of Hopkinson's career in which she is exceptionally prolific with her fiction writing, with the publication of *The Salt Roads* (2003) and *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), and editorializing, as seen in *Mojo: Conjure Stories* (2003), *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* (2004) and *Tesseracts Nine: New Canadian Speculative Fiction* (2005). In an unpublished interview with the editor, Isiah Lavender, at the Twenty-sixth International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts in 2005, Hopkinson and Lavender get to talking about the struggles Queer

## **Books in Review**, continued

of Color writers face when trying to speak about their intersectional struggle: Hopkinson notes "there was no room to have that kind of conversation" (Lavender, 2022, p. 117) and continues, "queerness is still seen as a white issue, to the irritation to those of us who are both of color and queer. A queer sensibility or politic still ends up becoming largely white … It's still a difficult discussion to have coming from communities of color, and that's why I think there's a hierarchy" (Lavender, 2022, p. 121). As a queer Black woman writer who had just recently published *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson faced a lot of resistance to the creativity and queer subject matter of her work and the interviews in this section highlight the layered prejudice she experienced.

Following a short period of homelessness Hopkinson returned to writing and published two young adult novels, *The Chaos* (2012) and *Sister Mine* (2013), and a short story collection, *Falling in Love with Hominids* (2015). She also enters the academe as a tenured professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. The next set of interviews occur between 2011-2015 and are written across multiple media. In the last interview of this group, with the literary magazine *Hot Metal Bridge,* Hopkinson talks through her discovery of "postcolonial science fiction," a term that was used to describe what she had been writing since 1998. Writers from marginalized backgrounds and "postcolonial communities" possess experiences that can be used to analyze and critique

the after-effects of colonialism (Lavender, 2022, p. 201) Much like the current popular backlash towards Critical Race Theory (which appears in the following group of interviews), the science fiction community has its own struggles with  members not embracing the forward and inclusive turn of the genre.

The final four interviews, from 2017-2021, display different examples of Hopkinson's rise to prominence as an  SF writer and her  advances into new genres. Her work is described as having "garnered [so much] scholarly acclaim" that academics insist on her "inclusion as a member of the big three Black science fiction writers," alongside Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delaney. (Lavender, 2022, p. xiii) In the second interview with Lavender, she is also considered a part of SF's "current big three" non-white writers of science fiction, alongside Nnedi Okorafor and NK Jemisin. In 2021, Hopkinson is heading into the graphic novel territory where she is working on a reboot of Neil Gaiman's Sandman Universe: "[Gaiman] added a new House to the Universe, the House of Whispers, watched over by the Yoruba-originated deity, Erzulie" (Lavender, 2022, p. 233). Hopkinson's involvement in this project came from her previous work involving Yoruba water deities and her decision to submit a pitch. Her pitch was approved and, in this interview, she details the journey she embarks on in comic book writing.

Lavender's intention was to "help the world know Nalo Hopkinson a little …

**Books in Review**, continued

better" (Lavender, 2022, p. xiv). In this collection, creative writers, scholars, and science/speculative fiction readers alike are able to witness the progression of Hopkinson's career as a science/speculative writer as well as the multiple experiences, hobbies, and struggles of her personal life. Conversations generates a multitude of generic definitions of the science/speculative fiction genre and a peek into the craft and research that Hopkinson undertakes through the writing process. As enthusiasts from different disciplines and approaches consider the future of the genre, it is important to consider the ways in which Nalo Hopkinson has used her creativity and life experiences to help ignite and continue the legacy of storytelling for BIPOC writers. ∎

# Books in Review

**Ida Yoshinaga, Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan**

*Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival in Speculative Fiction*

The MIT Press, 2022, pb, 356pp, $30.00

ISBN 9780262543941ISBN 978-3-319-13235-8

Reviewed by **Tiffany Fritz**

*Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction* recognizes speculative fiction's unique ability to imagine alternative ways of being as it responds to Berners-Lee's premise that we have no back-up world, no secret speculative planet to which we can escape, and to Anzaldúa's argument that "nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldúa, 1987). Thus, the editors and contributors introduce what they call "Science Fiction Studies 3.0 — "a justice-centered thought experiment to survive an era of futurity in crisis" (p. xv). This book explores speculative texts' themes of resistance and transformation — not for one-to-one instruction manuals on conducting revolution, but ways of being that might move our own world "beyond the inequalities and injustices of our times," reflecting a hopeful yet realistic collection of strategies for communities to survive and thrive in an age of neofascism and global capitalism.

This intersectional call for accompliceship and cooperation between marginalized groups comes from three long-standing scholars of science fiction. Lead editor Ida

Yoshinaga contributes a preface and interlude that contextualize the book's overall arguments. She works primarily in film, media, and journalism through the Georgia Institute of Technology, with a particular focus on social justice and cultural diversity. She is joined by Gerry Canavan, editor of *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Film and Television* as well as the author of *Octavia E. Butler* and associate professor of literature at Marquette and long-time science fiction ecocritic. Sean Guynes, whose previous work in the field includes editorial work in several scholarly journals and books as well as shorter contributions to *Strange Horizons* and *Tor.com*, acts as both an editor and a contributor.

Yoshinaga and her peers arrange the book around four major approaches to Science Fiction Studies 3.0 though they acknowledge that such categorizations are "neither static nor completely separate". In the first, 'Emergence,' authors consider how empathy and intercommunity solidarity function as agents of inciting change, and the exigence for nascent community response. Then, the essays in 'Rupture' interrogate the existing, normative orders and identify outliers and how

## **Books in Review**, continued

they upset those orders. The section entitled 'Transformation' considers structural changes enacted through coalitions and alternative ways of modeling communities before, finally, 'Revolution' considers the material actions of uprisings that lead to social reorganization.

A reader might imagine this spectrum of approaches to reflect a timeline of community change—the building of community solidarity as the food of change, the ability to highlight the current order's instability as the way in which we focus change, the imagining of alternative ways of being that would better serve our multitudinous humanities, and finally the execution of such change. The proposed separation between these topics is something of a misnomer, as Yoshinaga acknowledges in her preface the significant overlap between the categories. As a result, *Uneven Futures* often spirals these ideas together and can be read in any order. To support the reader's ability to hop around via table of contents, Yoshinaga labels the essays in the table of contents with the text they are analyzing. In some ways, this approach feels more intended by the authors than to read the book cover-to-cover as I did, and the ambiguity of structure is in some ways a reinforcement of the themes it explores, a disruption to the standard of imposing linearity on a cluster of disparate perspectives.

The introduction and interlude, written by the editors to frame the book, suggest that the collection is intended to open discussion about science fiction studies across various disciplines. To anchor scholars from outside of science fiction studies, Yoshinaga's introduction incorporates enough context to imply the meaning of terms like "Anthropocene" and "subaltern," while her interlude more comfortably packs in higher level vocabulary ("variegated") and jargon ("multiformalisms" and "dynamic temporalities" and "hybridizable modality"), which require a comfort with, not just science fictional literature itself, but with the academic study of it in the context of formality and cultural studies approaches. This book therefore reads as an invitation for fellow academic theorists to join in a brainstorming session on potential new frameworks and strategies for consideration, rather than a commitment to direct advocacy or wide distribution of specific practical tools.

Because of the intended structural conceit that the interdisciplinary audience can jump into the book anywhere, many of the book's contributors reiterate real world exigence that necessitates strategic survival, including the disproportionate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic across social groups and the shifting racial landscape of United States politics. Others jump right into handling the texts they put under the microscope. Texts that the average science fiction scholar could be presumed familiar with, such as Flatland, are treated with a comfortable familiarity, while less-studied texts like Sofia Samatar's "How to Get Back to the

**Books in Review**, continued

Forest" are afforded substantial explanation and contextualization within the analysis.

That said, for any scholar immersed in the field or interested in engaging it, it would be a mistake to overlook this book. Several of the contributing essays provide novel and particularly insightful approaches to understanding how science fiction can imagine a way out of the mess of our contemporary society. They emphasize the value of frameworks like radical compassion, testimony, and mutual aid networks. They debate the utility of the master's tools in dismantling oppressive systems, and whether anything of value can be salvaged from a society that built itself on colonial ideas or if we must burn it all down to find a fresh start. They experiment with non-carceral justice, reparations, and radical sovereignty in varying levels of complexity, and further explore how conditioning and censorship can colonize the mind in ways that make the mere act of existing as an outlier inherently radical. The strategies explored within this text stretch widely and deeply as they consider the ways in which science fiction opens windows into other lives that we could be living, allowing the scholarly reader to weigh the merits and limitations of these approaches. It codifies the interdependency of the fields of science fiction and social justice activism and opens dialogue between scholars to explicitly negotiate these connections as they become increasingly essential to the diversifying field of contemporary science fiction. ∎

## References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *1987. Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

# Books in Review

**Lars Schmeink and Ingo Cornils**

*New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction*

Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022, hb, 317 pp, $149.99

ISBN 978-3-030-95963-0

Reviewed by **Alex Crayon**

The anthology *New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction* shines a light on German contributions to an ever-growing genre whose primary concern is our collective future. Edited by Lars Schmeink and Ingo Cornils, this collection of fifteen scholarly essays engages with science fiction (SF) from a variety of thematic foci, each concerned with what that future might hold: climate disaster, AI overlords, interstellar colonization, time travel. In their introduction, the editors state that this collection is a means to address a gap in scholarship surrounding German SF post-2000. This anthology thoroughly accomplishes this goal, examining a diverse cast of German SF works, from film to television to novels, to highlight SF's unique ability to showcase the imagined (and inevitable) collision of past, present, and future. Divided into four parts—New Inspirations, New Criticism, New Identities, and New Boundaries—the collection emphasizes the "new" occurring within the fictions and without, underscoring German SF as a growing, evolving genre whose geographic specificity lends a particular sociopolitical and cultural approach to the genre's relent-

less curiosity. Thus, *New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction* provides a comprehensive overview of German SF and its potential as both a harbinger and a guide.

The first section discusses audiovisual manifestations of German SF narratives in television and film. "Going Round in Cycles: Time Travel and Determinism in the Netflix Show Dark" by Juliane Blank considers the time-travel show Dark, the first German show commissioned by Netflix, as an internationally accessible entrance to Germany's contribution to the SF megatext. The next essay, "Popular German Science Fiction Film and European Migration" by Gabriele Mueller, examines German genre cinema by exhibiting three films whose near-future dystopias challenge Eurocentric refugee narratives. Then, in "White German Agency in the Science Fiction Films *Transfer* (2010), *Die kommenden Tage* (2010), *Hell* (2011)" Evan Torner discusses three additional movies and comments on the erasure of POC in SF narratives, especially in the German context, and pushes for the genre to unmoor itself from white future imaginings. The three essays of New

## **Books in Review**, continued

Inspirations reflect on contemporary depictions of novum—elements that transcend the reality that grounds the story, thereby unsettling the narrative and those within it—and contribute to the scholarly conversation around contemporary audiovisual German SF that is more accessible to the public than some of the sprawling novels discussed in later essays.

The second section takes up the Anthropocene as the first avenue into criticism of literary German SF. In "Apocalyptic Greeneries: Climate, Vegetation, and the End of the World" by Solvejg Nitzke, climate and vegetation as agents of dystopian human futures provide fertile ground for examining nonhuman worlds and forces in three novels that invert the pastoral trope. Next, "The Language of Ice in the Anthropocene: German Science Fiction and Eco-Literature" by Matteo Gallo Stampino considers three further novels that center ice and its personification in an anthropocenic discussion of a future victim to the nefarious and uncaring forces of capitalism. The third essay, "Environmental Destruction and Misogyny in Karen Duve's Novel *Macht"* by Clarisa Novello, employs an ecofeminist critique to decry capitalism and its intertwined, inherent masculinity that degrades the non-human world. In the New Criticism section, the anthology grapples with the imminent reality of climate change and the dystopia looming on the horizon of a time dominated by masculinist capitalism determined to strip nature of its every vitality.

The third section foregrounds the posthuman in its conversations about health, death, technology, and consciousness. "The Paradoxes of Illness and Health in Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti"* by Mylène Branco examines a novel set in alternative futuristic Germany, "a health state in which citizens are constantly monitored" (155) and analyzes the author's ideas of Big-Brother-esque surveillance and intervention in both physical and psychological illnesses. The next essay is "Coming to Terms with the Present: Critical Theory and Critical Posthumanism in Contemporary German Science Fiction" by Hanna Schumacher, which comments on history, contemporaneity, and dystopia through the study of two texts and the application of critical posthumanism from theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno. An essay "The End of Humanity's Monotony: Posthumanism and Artificial Life in Dietmar Dath's *The Abolition of Species and Venus' Victory"* by Roland Innerhofer analyzes two linked novels that tell of a distant, planet-hopping future involving cybernetics and artificial intelligence and offer an "open, undecided perspective on the posthuman future" (208). Finally, "Optimizing the Human: A Posthuman Taxonomy in the Works of Teresa Hannig" by Lars Schmeink dives into novels concerned with human enhancement—uploading consciousnesses, integrating tech surveillance into bodies, living in virtual realities—and whose themes grapple with the humanity of robots and the potential of socialism in a future where redistribution

## **Books in Review**, continued

goes hand in hand with big data. The four essays of New Identities interrogate "the human" and extrapolate how this concept will change over time and how technology might merge with our physical and mental selves in a posthuman future.

The fourth section details fiction that pushes the genre of German SF forward, into unorthodox territory with unique critical potential. "Marc-Uwe Kling's *QualityLand: 'Funny Dystopia' as Social and Political Commentary"* by Joscha Klüppel forwards the argument that humor, grounded in the tension between utopia and dystopia, can catalyze an underlying anxiety in the SF reader. Then, in "Beyond the 'Last Man' Narrative: Notes on Thomas Glavinic's *Night Work* (2008)" Kristina Mateescu offers a critical analysis that dissects the philosophical rumination, self-reflexivity, and "denial of scientific explanation" (252) in the novel and their subversive effects on the "last man" genre of SF. Last, "A Utopianism That Transcends Books: Dirk C. Fleck's Ecological Science Fiction" by Peter Seyferth focuses on a set of ecocritical novels that forward the philosophy of equilibrism and that blur climate fiction and ecothriller while muddying the delineation between dystopia and utopia. This final section of essays looks to the experimental and the transcendent to situate the utopia/dystopia divide as a fundamental question in the genre; indeed, editor Ingo Cornils muses on the function of defeatist dystopias in the anthology's conclusion and decides that the friction between utopia and

dystopia provides a generative future for German SF: "writing against the dystopian grain is indeed a radical act" (p. 305).

Ultimately useful for both composers and critics of SF, this collection engages with ongoing academic dialogues about the form and function of science fiction. The above analyses of certain works and/ or oeuvres interrogate the questions that undergird this function: does SF entertain or galvanize, inform or capitulate? Alhough the anthology could be more accessible to readers outside of the academy, *New Perspectives on Contemporary German Science Fiction* does its job and does it well, carving a niche for contemporary German SF to raise its voice as a prominent contributor to the future of the genre. ∎

# About the Contributors

## Artist

**Amy Z**. As an artist inspired by the night's mystery, the allure of moons, cloudy skies, and ancient castles, my work fuses nature, folklore, the occult, and science fiction. I invite you into a world where magical realms are framed by dramatic skies and timeless architecture. Dedicated to "Art for Everyone," I donate my images—rich in stormy atmospheres and castle silhouettes—to the Creative Commons on Pixabay, ensuring art remains accessible. Explore my creations for a journey through mystical and futuristic landscapes. Follow me at https://studentandwriter.com/prettysleepy-art/

## Authors

**Craig Rustici** is Dr. Mervin Livingston Schloss Distinguished Professor for the Study of Disabilities professor of English, and Director of Disability Studies at Hofstra University. Initially trained as a scholar of early modern British literature, he has published articles in *Modern Philology, Studies in Philology, Spenser Studies, and Renaissance and Reformation*. His book *The Afterlife of Pope Joan* (U. Michigan Press) analyzes representations of an apocryphal woman who reportedly cross-dressed her way to the papacy. His disability-studies scholarship appears or is forthcoming in the *Journal of Gender, Ethnic, and Cross-Cultural Studies; Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*; and *Cusp: Late 19th-/Early 20th-Century Cultures*.

**Adebayo Oluwayomi** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. His research and teaching interests contribute to the areas of African/Africana Philosophy, Critical Race Theory, Philosophy of Race, Black Intellectual History and Black Male Studies.

**Andrew Nyongesa** (Ph.D.)is a novelist and lecturer with a great passion for English language and literature. Some of his published works are *The Rise of Rodedom* (2013), *The Endless Battle* (2016); *The Water Cycle* (2018) and *Many in One and Other Stories* (2019); all of which spin around the struggle of the underdog to subvert the values of the dominant group. His writing draws from his keen observation of the African society and desire to dethrone the dominant beliefs that incarcerate the otherwise free person. His publications can be traced at www.amazon.com/authors/andrewnyongesa Nyongesa is a Lecturer of Literature, St Paul's University, Limuru Campus, Kenya.

## Book Reviewers

**Alessandra (Sandra) Jacobo** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at the University of Kansas and a Diversity Dissertation Fellow at Middle Tennessee State University. Her dissertation, *Femme Futurisms:Nuanced Understandings of Black Femininity in Speculative Fiction*, argues that through the narrative of embodiment, Afro-Caribbean authors

**About the Contributors**, continued

re-shape the genre, create visibility for nuanced understandings of Blackness and use writing to heal from cultural and generational traumas unique to their experience of interlocking oppressions.

**Tiffany Fritz** is an MFA student in fiction at the University of Kansas. They completed their bachelor's degree in Secondary English Education at Northern Arizona University. An alum of Futurescapes and Under the Volcano, she specializes in the use of monstrosity in speculative fiction to explore marginalization and trauma.

**Alex Crayon** is a second-year Ph.D. student at the University of Kansas, studying Creative Writing and focusing on fiction. Previously, he attended the University of Oklahoma where he received his B.A. in English Writing with minors in Spanish and Classical Culture, and his M.A. in Rhetoric and Writing Studies with a concentration in Creative Writing. His creative work explores family, addiction, religion, and exile through fantastical and slipstream genres. His scholarly interests include writing center pedagogy and inter-center transfer, contemporary speculative fiction, modern mythological retellings, and social fiction. He loves his dog Percy.

## Editors

**A.D. Boynton II** (or, Anthony Boynton) is a cultural and literary critic from the Deep South. A doctoral candidate in the Department of English at University of Kansas, Boynton's scholarly work includes literary and cultural criticism primarily in the areas of Afrofuturism, gender and queer theory, and politics of representation in U.S. popular culture. They have curated the *4:44 Syllabus* and have work published in the *College Language Association Journal, South Atlantic Journal*, and several online public platforms. Boynton will defend their dissertation, Abiding Apparitions: Ghosts of the Black South, in the spring.

**Barbara Jasny** has a Ph.D. in molecular biology from Rockefeller University. After a period of conducting wet-lab research, she joined Science magazine, the weekly journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1985. Until she retired in 2018, she solicited papers and evaluated research reports for publication in genetics, medicine, and computational social science. Barbara is author of more than 60 research papers, editorials, and overviews, and has been involved in communicating science in books, articles, posters, virtual presentations, CDs, and podcasts. She enjoys a variety of science fiction genres, including (but not limited to) fantasy, and loves gem and mineral collecting, folk music, and (her newest passion) her grandchildren.

**Débora Madrid** has a Ph.D. in Art, Literature and Cultural Studies from Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain). Her research interests include science fiction cinema, particularly Spanish science-fiction films, posthuman and transhuman

## About the Contributors, continued

science fiction and Afrofuturism. In 2022, she published the book *Creaciones (In) humanas. Alteraciones y suplantaciones del ser humano en el cine español* [or, *(In) human Creations. Alterations and Impersonations of the Human Being in Spanish Cinema*]. She is currently teaching as Fine Arts Faculty at the Universidad de La Laguna (Spain).

**Jerry (Rafiki) Jenkins** is Professor of English at Palomar College and a lecturer in the English and Comparative Literature Department at San Diego State University. His research focuses on Black speculative fiction and film, with an emphasis on horror and science fiction, and he is the author of *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction* (Ohio State UP, 2019) and *Anti-Blackness and Human Monstrosity in Black American Horror Fiction* (Ohio State UP, 2024). Rafiki also co-edited, with Martin Japtok, *Authentic Blackness/Real Blackness: Essays on the Meaning of Blackness in Literature and Culture* (Peter Lang, 2011) and *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). When he is not writing, Rafiki enjoys being with family, breaking people off in "bones" (i.e., the game of dominoes), and listening to old school R&B, funk, reggae, hip hop, and rock.

**Tonie Marie Gordon** is a researcher, writer, and speaker whose work focuses on sustainable and inclusive innovation in healthcare, genomics and precision med-

icine, environmental health, and health equity. She's also an editor of scholarly manuscripts that cover a range of topics in public health, healthcare, social science, and medicine. As a multidisciplinary sociologist, her work blends the social and humanistic sciences with the natural sciences and the humanities. Her interest in science fiction occurs at the intersection of these disciplines and how they individually and collectively speak to the future of science, technology, and their impact on society.

**Zoha Kazemi** is an Iranian speculative fiction writer. She currently lives in Tehran and has a BSc in engineering and an MA in English literature, with a dissertation on science fiction. She started writing fiction twelve years ago, both in Farsi and English. She has published fourteen novels, a short story collection, and a flash fiction collection in Iran. Her post-apocalyptic novel Rain Born is available in English through Austin McCauley Pub. She is interested in all science fiction themes and sub-genres, with a preference for dystopian fiction, bio-punk, post-apocalypse, and AI.

**Sayan Chattopadhyay** is a doctoral researcher and part of the Faculty of English at Adamas University, India. He researches the changing perspectives of Postmodern concepts, focusing on the "assumed" politicized science fiction of the 20th and the 21st centuries, globally. His interest within the field spans Retro-

## About the Contributors, continued

Futurism to Postanimalism and beyond.
His books, research articles on the sub-
genres of science fiction, short stories,
media interviews, and other publications
are widely and openly available on the
internet for anyone to explore. ∎

# JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
# CALL FOR PAPERS

## SPECIAL ISSUE ON VIRTUAL REALITY AND CYBERSPACE

The MOSF Journal of Science Fiction, in celebration of the 40th anniversary of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the 25th of *The Matrix*, seeks abstracts on topics concerning, but not limited to:

> Virtual realities in the fiction of Isaac Asimov, William Gibson, Pat Cadigan, Walter Mosley, Neal Stephenson, and other writers
> Cyberspace in tv/film: *The Matrix, Black Mirror, Akira, M3GAN, Ex Machina, AI Love You, Digimon, Ghost in the Shell*, etc.
> Artificial intelligence and machine learning
> Cyberpunk and cyberfunk aesthetics, in film, music, and other media
> Telexistence, embodiment, especially with consideration to race, gender, disability, memory, and other discourses
> Video games, gaming
> Post and trans-humanisms
> Capitalism, cryptocurrency, and web economies
> VR and simulation application, especially in (sf) pedagogy, public programming, engaged humanities

Submit your abstracts to the Managing Editor via email with the subject line indicating the special issue title.

REVIEW OF ABSTRACTS WILL BEGIN
APRIL 25TH, 2024

## Call for Papers: Special Issue on Virtual Reality and Cyberspace

The MOSF Journal of Science Fiction, in celebration of the 40th anniversary of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the 25th of *The Matrix*, will have a special issue dedicated to Virtual Reality and Cyberspace. The Journal seeks abstracts on topics concerning, but not limited to:

• Virtual realities in the fiction of Isaac Asimov, William Gibson, other writers

• Cyberspace and digital space in tv/film: *The Matrix, Black Mirror, Akira, M3GAN, Ex Machina, AI Love You, Digimon, Ghost in the Shell*, etc.

• Artificial intelligence and machine learning

• Cyberpunk and cyberfunk aesthetics, in film, music, and other media

• Telexistence, embodiment, especially with consideration to race, gender, disability, memory, and other discourses

• Video games, gaming

• Post and trans-humanisms

• Capitalism, cryptocurrency, and web economies

• VR and simulation application, especially in (sf) pedagogy, public programming, engaged humanities

For this issue, articles are expected to be 4000 to 6000 words. Short essays and book reviews of 1000 to 1500 words on similar topics are also invited.

For inclusion in this special issue, submit an article abstract of 500 words or essay pitch to the Managing Editor by email (anthony.boynton@museumofsciencefiction.org) with the subject line indicating the special issue title. First review of abstracts will take place by May 1st, 2024 with notification to authors during the summer. To stay in touch with our publication and programming, please like us on Facebook at Journal of Science Fiction and follow us on Instagram @mosfjournalofsciencefiction.