Black Grit: or, Why I Study Race and Racism in Science Fiction

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“Why study race in science fiction?” Answering that personal question, the heart of my professional being, requires Doctor Who’s TARDIS, preferably accompanied by the fourth (Tom Baker) or tenth (David Tennant) incarnation of the Doctor.

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I fondly remember watching television shows in my childhood like Doctor Who, Buck Rogers, and V. I recall sitting at the top of the stairs after bedtime, out of sight, thrilled by a certain blue box, Twiki, and lizard men. What boy did not like time machines, robots, and lizard men? I also recollect battling over the remote control with my older sister on most days to determine what cartoons to watch, particularly on Saturday morning. When I happened to win, we viewed cartoons like Star Blazers, Battle of the Planets, and Astro Boy. Derek Wildstar must have been my favorite cartoon character if not Keyop of the G-force. I so wanted rockets in the soles of my shoes kind of like Astro Boy. But I have darker memories, too, like my racial awakening in early February of 1983 in Derby, NY, where the n-bomb (‘nigger’) dropped on me and how it overlapped with my first science fiction reading experience – Ray Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles (1950). Even pinpointing this specific...
intersection as my first twinkling of racial consciousness may be imprecise because of a previous experience about eighteen months earlier which I now recognize as institutional racism.

During the fall of 1981, I entered second grade. For some unknown reason, I was placed in remedial reading. Yet, I remember going to the library with my parents all the time, checking out books, possessing my very own library card, and knowing how to work the Dewey Decimal System. I never really wondered why I was in remedial reading. While only seven at the time, I have never been indifferent to reading. Never. In fact, both of my parents were avid readers. My father enjoyed westerns, particularly Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), and my mother loved science fiction and fantasy. I vividly recall laying on my mother’s back, looking over her shoulder as she flipped through the pages of many books on various evenings, and the exact timbre of her reading voice. On one occasion she was reading Ursula K. LeGuin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) and brought Duny to life for me although I was confused by his other names: Ged and Sparrowhawk. However, Duny was just like me, a “quick boy, loud and proud and full of temper” (2). It helped that his “red-brown” skin was very much like my own (45). I was fascinated by this similarity without being aware of exactly what skin color meant.

Anyhow, my special education reading teacher, Mrs. Ennis, immediately recognized that I did not belong there. To prove this undeniable truth, she intensified my interest in reading even more by introducing me to Beverly Cleary’s *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (1965). I thought it was perfectly normal for a boy named Keith to talk with a mouse called Ralph about riding motorcycles while staying in a hotel. “Pb-pb-b-b-b-b” was the sound that made the motorcycle go (9). With no cajoling necessary, James Howe’s *Bunnicula: A Rabbit-Tale of Mystery* (1979) was the next book Mrs. Ennis had me read. Who does not love a dog and a cat teaming up to protect
their humans from a vegetarian vampire bunny rabbit? Finally, she sent me to the school’s small library, where I chose two books on my own: Edward Packard’s *The Cave of Time* (1979) and *The Third Planet from Altair* (1980). Both books were in the new *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. In six weeks’ time, Mrs. Ennis helped me move into the gifted reading program at Highland Elementary school. Thirty-three years later, I somewhat cynically believe my initial placement at Highland Elementary had something to do with my race as the only black boy in the school. Nonetheless, I genuinely treasure Mrs. Ennis.

Ironically, the most creative racial epithet ever shouted at me occurred one afternoon at the bus stop on the corner of Chaffee Court and Minuteman Trail during the second week of sixth grade in mid-September 1985. I guess the bunch of thrash metal wannabes from the high school had nothing better to do than harass the eleven-year-olds getting off the bus that day. One of these teenaged white boys called me the “walking talking tootsie roll.” He was there to pick up his little brother who also happened to be in the sixth grade. Well, that phrase followed me down the school halls throughout the first quarter of the school year. The little brother and a few of his friends decided to emulate the older brother trying to act cool and made a target of me. I would often hear, “Hey! Tootsie roll,” when I passed them in the halls, waited in the cafeteria line for lunch, and especially on the school bus.

Unsurprisingly, I took refuge in the library at every opportunity and I struck up a friendship with the librarian Mrs. Gaughan. Although my reading tastes varied, I do recall reading several sf authors: Victor Appleton II, Daniel Keyes, Robert A. Heinlein, Steven Barnes, and somewhat amazingly, Octavia E. Butler. I swear that I read all of Victor Appleton’s Tom Swift, Jr. books that the library contained like *Tom Swift and His Flying Lab* (1954). After blowing through these books, Mrs. Gaughan recommended Daniel Keyes’s Nebula Award-winning novel *Flowers for Algernon* (1966). I
very much enjoyed the epistolary style of the novel as Charlie Gordon writes progress reports regarding his surgically augmented IQ.

I also remember reading Heinlein’s sf juvenile *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955) and really liking the main character Rod Walker. As the final test for an advanced survival course, Roddie and his classmates were teleported and accidentally stranded on an alien planet for a couple of years. Despite the white guy on the book’s cover, I had always assumed that Roddie was black because he was obviously interested in the “big Zulu girl” (6), Caroline Mshiyeni, liked dancing with her, and was teased about “planning to marry” her by the group (139). My eleven-year old logic must have dictated that Rod was black because only blacks dated other blacks despite the sixteen years of interracial wedlock between my parents. My pre-teen suspicions about Rod Walker’s race have been happily confirmed. An extra textual letter existed where Heinlein declared that Rod was black according to Heinlein Society researcher Robert James (Houdek Heinlein Society).

I very much wanted to see that letter so I recently went online to the Robert A. and Virginia Heinlein Archives located at UC Santa Cruz. I paid three dollars to gain access to the definitive proof of this letter’s existence. I found a nine-page typed letter to Sandra Jane Fulton, a Lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, under general correspondence, 1965-1967, A-L. In part 4 of box number 313, on page 198 of the archived material (the seventh page of the letter) Heinlein chats about race in general as well as in his works including two unnamed books *Farnham’s Freehold* (1964) and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) in addition to *Starship Troopers* (1959) and *Tunnel in the Sky*. Heinlein emphatically states:

> In another book (TUNNEL IN THE SKY) I used a Negro boy as my hero [Rod Walker] – but never mentioned his skin color and buried the proof like clues in a detective story. Intentionally. … Sandra, I don’t know (and don’t care) whether Negroes-as-a-group are smarter than whites-as-a-group, or vice versa, nor do I know of any scientific data on the matter worthy of the name.

Later in the school year, I discovered African American science fiction writers. I bought a paperback copy of Steven Barnes’s novel *Streetlethal* (1983) at the local Walden Books in McKinley Mall one weekend. I was perplexed because the cover depicted a tan white man with wavy brown hair while Aubry Knight, “a statue carved in obsidian,” was clearly described as a butt-kicking black man in a techno-dystopian future. I wanted to be Aubry Knight. I wanted to kick some butt too, particularly
those of my tormentors. I instantly knew Mrs. Gaughan had been reading over my shoulder when on my next visit to the library she handed me a different paperback edition of the novel with Aubry Knight noticeably illustrated as a black man in dark shades. Librarians are awesome! Together, she and I concluded that Barnes had to be a black sf writer.

Mrs. Gaughan introduced me to Octavia Butler’s work with her personal copy of the June 1984 issue of *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, featuring Octavia Butler’s Nebula and Hugo award-winning novelette ‘Bloodchild’. That story had one of the coolest covers I have ever seen featuring an Asian boy, Gan, with his chest hollowed out around a red globule egg with what looked like a blood red alien centipede (Tlic) leaving bloody footprints on a white table in front of him. I showed that issue to my mother, who explained the meaning of symbiosis to me after reading the story herself. In hindsight, I was not ready for a male pregnancy story at that time in my life. Of course, I would later come across and purchase my own copy of the seventy-ninth issue of Asimov’s at the Haunted Bookshop, a used book store in Iowa City, during my doctoral coursework because of that specific memory.

I ended sixth grade as the winner of the ‘Most Enthusiastic Library User Award’ at John T. Waugh Intermediate School in Angola, New York. Did I mention that Mrs. Gaughan created the award just for me? I can still hear the student body’s applause ringing in my ears from June 24, 1986. This award is my proudest academic achievement. It means more to me than all three of my academic degrees because of what I experienced as the only black youth in the school.

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Flash forward twenty-nine years across time, space, and various adventures from the banks of Lake Erie in Western New York to the Bluebonnet Swamp in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to 2014. So far, I have produced two books on the subjects of race and racism in science fiction:
I hope this brief personal essay demonstrates my commitment. I do not study this area because of its trendiness. I feel it. I live it. I hope to tell it all one day.

End Notes

1 See my introduction to Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction.

References


**Bio**

Isiah Lavender, III is Assistant Professor of English at Louisiana State University, where he researches and teaches courses in African American literature and science fiction. In addition to his book *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), his recently published collection *Black and Brown Planets: the Politics of Race in Science Fiction* is now available from the University Press of Mississippi.

October 6, 2014 in Episode 7, Episodes. Tags: Race, Racism in SF
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