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Difference Engine: Aliens, Robots, and Other Racial Matters in the History of Science Fiction

In the late 1970s, Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin published *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision*, a work that heralded the maturation of the American academy with regards to the genre as an object of serious study. Parts of this pioneering work stand up to contemporary scrutiny. They argue, however, that, while science fiction has been awkward about sex (or the presence of women), it has had a laudable tendency toward producing futures where racial others appear but in which race “is not remarkable in any way” (188). Thus, they are able to cover the matter in a page and a half. Their reading of the genre underplays the significant role of race in the construction of particular generic concerns as well as its continued importance in defining the social issues at stake in genre futurism. Their hope is in a science fiction heralding the arrival of a post-racial future in which the wounds inflicted by current conflicts around race are healed, leaving no scars. Interestingly, the liberal racial politics that structure their position lead them to present Robert A. Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959), with Samuel R. Delany as a friendly witness, as the representative model for this hope.

In the three decades since the publication of their epochal work, science fiction and the American academy have changed with respect to the way that race is presented and understood. The prominent careers of Delany, Octavia E. Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Steven Barnes indicate that sf is not now a genre closed to definition by non-white voices. A steady stream of scholarly monographs and essay collections has emerged from university presses representing the growing influence of race as a viable area of genre study. The year 2008 saw the publication of Marleen Barr’s *Afro-future Females*, Adilifu Nama’s *Black Space*, and John Rieder’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Routledge has announced *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia E. Butler, Jewell Gomez and Nalo Hopkinson* by Ingrid Thaler for publication in 2010. And Isiah Lavender III’s manuscript, *Blackgrounds of Science Fiction*, is currently under review at a major press.

The methods by which we examine the history of race (and racism) in science fiction have also multiplied. Afrofuturism, for example, reveals that sf conventions and narratives have an appeal beyond stereotypes of its core audience of adolescent white males. Its definition in the early 1990s has had the effect of making visible an African American speculative tradition both within and outside the generic confines of sf. This analytic gesture received formal recognition in 2007 with the publication of a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* devoted to the movement, edited by Mark Bould and Rone Shavers. It is arguable, therefore, that race studies has gained significant ground within science fiction studies. More generally, my own *Astrofuturism* (2003) offers some insight into how

important resolving race as a social issue has been to arguments for the social utility of space exploration as a science-fictional narrative of transcendent national destiny. This activity indicates that the lexicon of robots and rockets, replicants and cyborgs, constitutive of the genre's particular kind of dreaming, is ready-made for voices traditionally deemed marginal.

The racial history of science fiction, therefore, is confined neither to Afrofuturism nor to the production of its black artists; it is also a legacy of its dead (and living) white writers. Following this point does not require that we change our sense of the genre's foundational texts but how we frame and read them. Mary Shelley's creature functions as an inaugural statement that establishes the artificially created racial other as a significant generic concern. In *The War of the Worlds* (1898), H.G. Wells connects the imperial and evolutionary strands of racial thinking through the paradigmatic encounter with his unsympathetic but intellectually superior brown-skinned Martians. Isaac Asimov's 1940s robot stories (collected in *I, Robot* [1950]) use the social conventions of a segregated America to project both the containment and potential of humanoid robots in relation to their human masters. I could go on with example after example, but I will resist the temptation to retrace familiar ground. My point is that this genre devoted to social extrapolation has race as part of its operating system. Taking race into account as a significant category of analysis would help create the futurist archive forecast in Veronica Hollinger's historical analysis.

Perhaps the great challenge or potential of contemporary science fiction is to imagine political/social futures in which race does not simply wither away but is transformed, changing into something different and perhaps unexpected. This would require paying attention to an actual history of race (and racism) in which what constitutes the Other and the Self is always under revision. This means noting not only where traditional definitions of race and racism are broken but also how they are reformed in new guises. The assumption here is that race (or even species) will always make some difference. The only question is how and under what conditions. This does not mean that racism (as we understand it) could not disappear as a structuring element in social relations, but it does make its positioning more challenging to imagine or represent.

I will, therefore, hazard a prediction. The future of sf and sf studies will be informed by race as a significant component of our social/political lives and any historically conceived future. What critical theories of race and difference have allowed us to see is that science fiction—as it is practiced—not only can forecast futures absent of racism but also futures in which racism persists, taking on new forms around new lines of difference. So I would argue that as we construct our histories of science fiction, we are faced with two propositions: 1) that, following Cornel West, race will still matter for the foreseeable future and 2) that, following Derrick Bell, racism will also persist in some form. What makes these practical certainties is due to the persistence of our own cultural history and also because, to quote Hollinger, we “remain [in] our physical instantiations” (272). Our expectations, research agendas, and writing strategies, at least in the near term, will be informed by the constant presence of race in our social and political lives and in the stories we can tell.

It has been argued that the dominant tradition of sf either metaphorizes race as a way of avoiding very real issues (Vint) or creates endless iterations of color-blind futures (Lavender). However, a reading of the past half-century of sf indicates that the issues at the heart of our experience of racial politics have also been a signal feature of generic production: for example, Philip K. Dick's presentation of racism and difference in *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and "The Minority Report" (1956). My short list of more direct treatments includes Philip José Farmer's RIVERWORLD series (1971-83), Mack Reynolds's NORTH AFRICA TRILOGY (1972-78), and *The Land Leviathan* (1974) by Michael Moorcock. This work from the turn of the 1970s marks an almost joint effort by white writers to bring their genre into dialogue with the civil unrest, political activism, and artistic innovation produced by African Americans in that era. In these circumstances, even the egregious racialism of Niven and Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977) has a place. The point here is not to make any qualitative statement about the nature of the engagement but to argue that the history of science fiction's imbrication with race needs further consideration.

A prominent feature of race studies in science fiction is that theories and methods are not confined to a particular discipline. African diaspora studies, critical race studies, queer theory, postcolonial studies, visual culture, and posthumanism, as well as those critical traditions founded within science fiction itself, are all contributing to a reassessment of its role in the constitution of the genre. As a result, what has seemed for so long a "white" expressive form has become, in retrospect, less a straightforward projection of particular caste interests and more an aesthetic expressive of a complex multiethnic society. As such it should not be surprising that the genre is capable of serious engagement with contemporary arguments around race yet is able to sustain (some might say to withstand) critical scrutiny of its record vis-à-vis race and its relations.

What is interesting about this work on race, alterity, and the other in sf is the commitment of scholars to the form itself. They write both to critique the genre for its implication in the racist discourses of white (hetero)normativity but also in defense of its potential to open readers to ordinary and radical forms of alterity. Lavender, for example, notes the genre's original investment in projecting white futures but celebrates its social inventiveness, its ability to creatively theorize race (192). Queer theorists uncover the ways in which generic handling of sexuality and gender performance has been tied to racial essentialism; but, as Wendy Pearson argues, they also tap into "sf's power to imagine alternative possibilities for the ways in which we live, and love, in the world" (307). Postcolonial studies have found sf renderings of the colonial encounter particularly fruitful in their critiques of self/other oppositions and extrapolation of the hybridity theorized by Homi Bhabha. Here science fiction reveals the other but also questions the presumption that the other is alien (Reid 257).

From the posthumanist perspective, race is a particular challenge. In its most radical and popular form, race is envisioned as something we shuck off as we leave our bodies. The Cartesian self escapes definition by moving into an imperium of pure mentation that escapes the ideologies inscribed on the body.

Reading Katherine Hayles's critique of Greg Egan's posthumanism, Hollinger highlights its replication of humanist philosophical binaries that justify hierarchies of mind and body, self and other (272). While this form of posthumanism is a dominant part of popular technoscience, it reads as a technological fix. It avoids the kind of rigorous social extrapolation that can take account of how human differences would condition the historical emergence of the posthuman. While, as Hollinger notes, Haraway's theorization of cyborgs represents an alternative, it remains a minority option. In technoscientific narrative, as developed by Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near* (2005) or Hans Moravec's *Mind Children* (1990), we will reach a historical moment in which race and racism will disappear along with our fleshly existence. We will then have achieved the next step toward our evolutionary destiny.

The problem with thought experiments proposing an end to the history of race (if not the human race) should not be taken as simply the skepticism of a cultural historian. If, as Adam Roberts argues, "race ... is something central to late twentieth-century constructions of 'American-ness'" (132), then to wave it away means that we must also accept the end of American culture. Following Roberts's argument that science fiction is a characteristic expression of that culture, racial transcendence would mean not a further evolution of the genre as we know it but conditions under which it would cease to exist.

Narratives of (human) racial transcendence within sf (*pace* the final minutes of *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968]) strain at the limits of its ordinary practice. The genre's central commitment has been to imagine future histories structured by the proliferation of race (the succession of "human" races in Stapledon's *Last and First Men* [1930], for example), not its disappearance. Over the past half-century, that practice has shifted from narratives that generally metaphorize or contain race to ones in which human racial difference may be considered alongside other parts of the standard furniture. This transition tracks the evolution of racial politics of this past half-century from the last decade of the Jim Crow era to Obama's America. This is also the context of the evolution of academic scholarship in the field from the early days of its professionalization in the 1960s and 1970s to the current, fairly stable institutionalization of which this Symposium is a part. Science fiction is no longer quite the ghetto it once was. Another fortuitous indication of the transition we have undergone is the theme for the 2010 International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts: race and the fantastic.

So where do we go from here? What are the most important questions to ask? Where should we work? Proposing a dominant research agenda, by imposing a single frame of reference, militates against the dynamic openness we have sought. While Roger Luckhurst's historiographic recapitulation arguing for a cultural history of science fiction cites "identitarian" projects as mounting important challenges in and to genre history, he also leaves us uncomfortably aware that such arguments suggest a new synthesis that could be both immodest and overcoherent. However, the contingent and multiple histories signaled by this research help us to see science fiction less as relevant only to a particular enfranchised minority and more as a significant cultural force that matters across the range of intellectual and popular as well as social interests. To this end the discussion of

ethics recently undertaken by Neil Easterbrook and Sherryl Vint strikes me as very productive.

Neil Easterbrook's essay on "Ethics and Alterity" provides a useful frame for how the social relations that structure racial difference might be conceived in light of their persistence under whatever regime we can imagine. If physical difference is not going away, if we are to remain "embodied"—to be embodied and speaking in whatever state of techno-organicity is to be embedded in discursive realms of difference (as Vint would say)—then how do we conceive our social relations in recognition of our obligations to others? Easterbrook turns to that part of our philosophical tradition that sees the self always and only coming into being in relation to the other (384). Following this, any subject is defined through a constant "opening to alterity." The implication here is that we only exist in constant dialectical relation to entities we consider "other." That language-grounded traffic voids the notion of Cartesian atomized subjects. In terms of possible and historically responsive readings of race and science fiction, this conception reveals the source of the trauma experienced by whites in Ray Bradbury's "Way in the Middle of the Air" (1950) and Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* (1965). From this position, according to Easterbrook, science fiction is a "critical reflectiveness that opens us to the other, replaces notions of duty with notions of answerability, and leaves us always and everywhere subject to the obligations of ethics" (392).

I am interested in this ethical turn because it helps me consider what is at stake in the popular scientific and science-fictional question: "Are we alone?" This query emerges from the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, a half-century-old science with a public face that, I argue, plays a significant role in its research agenda. Answering the question is the *raison d'être* of the science. It also opens up speculation on what contact with an extraterrestrial other would mean to *homo sapiens*. Following Easterbrook's lead, it would produce a crisis of othering that would require rethinking what human beings mean. Given that Kurzweil is skeptical of the existence of extraterrestrial others (he prefers futures in which our descendants expand outward without hindrance), it would also require redefining the mainstream variety of posthumanism. The ethical posthumanism advocated by Vint and the language-based understanding of alterity and ethics offered by Easterbrook would make that crisis less dangerous, less likely to produce ever newer forms of racism. This helps us address a crucial flaw of popular posthumanism.

In her study *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), Sherryl Vint argues that no version of the posthuman will persist (174). This prompts us to consider not only the arrival of successive versions of posthumanity (varieties already prefigured in fiction), but also to see that several varieties could exist at the same time. In *Mind Children* (1990), Hans Moravec gives us one transcendent, universal type. The model that Vint opposes to this scenario is that dramatized by Bruce Sterling in his 1985 novel, *Schismatrix*. She argues that the posthumanism Sterling presents here is open, ever changing, and politically responsive. I will add that Sterling's portrayal also indicates that the physical transformations that are signifiers of

posthumanism are vulnerable to the desires of differently raced and sexed bodies. In other words, your posthuman self depends on what kind of other you are now.

The future I see, therefore, one that science fiction has been imagining, is a layer cake that includes us in the mix. We can certainly imagine an abrupt break that makes our world an unavailable prehistory, but paradigm shifts (whether technological or social) never completely bury what is past. Old technologies and ways of being persist as residual traces, haunting any new hegemony.

The persistence of embodiment (however mediated), the recognition that selves are also heteroglossic creations, implies the persistence of the familiar social/political conventions that we use to situate ourselves in history and culture. The persistence of race and the likely reproduction of exclusions or oppressions around difference does not mean, however, that the social relations we experience will not change (for better or worse). Indeed, the fact that we see race and ethnicity differently now indicates that change is part of what make these social formations so durable. Science fiction's penchant for racial play, for making new races or species, allows us to experiment with how beings are created, developed, and changed. Greg Bear's investigation of technological and racial others in *Queen of Angels* (1990) and Octavia Butler's creation of a new type of racially marked vampire in *Fledgling* (2005) are excellent cases in point. The bottom line is that even post-Singularity, posthuman cyborgs will find themselves hailed by the languages they speak, the families to which they belong, the affinities that they create, and the exclusions that they confront.

If I am right, there is room to say that science fiction is an engine of difference (an engine of prolific alterity or of proliferating alterities). It is a fantastic medium through which we continually construct and manage images of new peoples and, therefore, new races. If we accept the implication that the representation of new races is an essential component of science fiction (as well as of human biosocial/historical evolution), we will have a better chance of gaining imaginative as well as political control over their transmission and meaning.

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