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Future Im/Perfect: Defining Success and Problematics in Science Fiction Expressions of Racial Identity

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Science fiction is regularly engaged in in an articulation and exploration of future visions that seek to transcend and/or escape present or historic conditions. For example, Mary Shelley's story of Dr. Frankenstein was a retelling of the classic story of Dr. Faust, but in her version the principal dramatic conflict is no longer Man versus God; instead, it's an exploration of how the technological/scientific condition impacts the human condition (specifically, mortality). Through these changes, her text subverts and reinterprets what Lyotard (1979) would call the metanarrative.

From their beginning, science fiction narratives have often been engaged in exposing and subverting mechanisms of power in society: questioning change, questioning dominance, and questioning things that mire us in present-day thinking. What's more, they often suggest our own obligation to participate, subvert, and/or emancipate the object discourse from the present. This process is compatible with academic approaches to critique. In Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley's *The Function of Fiction* (2008), they argue for the power and possibility of fiction. In their words,

> carefully crafted literary stories are not flawed empirical accounts, but are instead simulations of selves in the social world. . . . The function of fiction is thus to be seen to include the recording, abstraction, and communication of complex social information in a manner that offers personal enactments of experience, rendering it more comprehensible than usual. Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it. (p. 173)

This provocation will specifically explore science fiction tropes, representations, and narratives having to do with multiracial identity (and in some cases, multispecies identity). What are the discursive parameters imposed by the genre in regards to race? Can latter-day hegemonic assumptions ever be subverted by a genre that inexorably projects presentist notions of race into the future?

Postracial Future Im/Perfect: Redefining Success?

In the original *Star Trek* episode, "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield" (Taylor, 1969), the crew of the starship *Enterprise* stumbles into an alien conflict that can be framed in two ways: a *freedom fighter* seeking asylum from the vindictive pursuit of a marshal, or a *dangerous subversive* trying to escape the application of justice. It turns out the conflict between the two aliens is predicated on their duo-chromatic differences: Each of their faces is split between black and white sides, yet one alien has the black side on the left, while the other has it on the right. Unable to overcome their irrational focus on the differences of one another's skin color, their conflict mounts. Even after discovering that all of the other members of their species had mutually annihilated each other, and even knowing that they were the last of their kind, the two aliens end up killing each other. Even though this story was ostensibly about an alien species, it was really about race relations in our own society. Thus, *Star Trek* and other science fiction functions as a critical narrative.

However, even though science fiction can be lauded for its critical and pioneering direction, there still remain both unresolved and unfinished objectives, and perhaps unforeseen negative consequences, from some of the representations. In *Deep Space Nine,* Captain Sisko breaks the color barrier in *Star Trek* as the franchise's first black captain. Troublingly, though, negative racial stereotypes and tropes are still sometimes exposed. Captain Sisko, a widower, establishes a new primary relationship rather conspicuously with practically the only black female on his station, or in the cast. This is a disturbing insinuation that in this distant (apparently) postracial future utopian society there still remains some insidious hegemonic mechanism of social control pushing an antimiscegenation agenda that would seem less anachronistic set in the antebellum South.

Escaping Discursive Parameters: Beyond the Problem of Multiracial Identity

Looking to a root science fiction trope—*Star Trek*'s first alien and multispecies character, Spock—we see an impactful narrative dealing, allegorically, with multiracial identity. Spock is continuously portrayed as having to deal with, or choose between, his human and Vulcan sides. Ramos (2009) explores this further wherein she describes the narrative roots of the trope back to the colonization of the Americas. In *Star Trek: Voyager,* B'Elanna Tores—the part-human, part-Klingon chief engineer, exhibits many of the stereotypical qualities of problematized multiracial identity. Ramos argues that, in this case, the character's eventual understanding, acceptance, and embrace of her *full* identity subverts the stereotype.

Expanding on this concept, Stuart Hall (1997) provides a sense of the consequence/impact of this coding in narrative. "Meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is a result of a signifying practice—a practice that produces meaning, that *makes things mean*" (p. 10). Race—or *meaning* in regard to race—is a discursively derived concept. In science fiction, present-day conceptions of multiracial identity risk being perpetually reified through their projection into the future. But these texts may also offer the opportunity to *make things mean,* differently. Science fiction texts *can* subvert our present biases.

Consider Ann Leckie's (2014) *Ancillary Justice*. One of the things about the novel that has drawn so much critical acclaim is the unique perspective from which the story is told—it uses a narrative device as a tool to deconstruct the way we arrive at our own concepts of gender and identity. The protagonist, Breq, has no inherent concept of things like gender, identity, or other notions related to human existence. This artificially intelligent, digitally integrated being, which was previously responsible for the direct control of an interstellar troop transport, is at the outset of the story limited to a single human-like body. Breq lacks any clear concept of individual identity or gender as its former experience had required it to control dozens of bodies simultaneously. Breq's complex identity isn't something that is embraced in the novel; rather, it is a problem to be resolved. Breq is characterized as "the Other," existing in a liminal space between human and AI. This can be understood as an allegory for multiracial identity. The novel seeks—and in remarkable measure, accomplishes—a subversion of popularly held notions involving gender and race. But does *Ancillary Justice*'s unique textual approach create a problem in trying to solve another? Do science-fiction narratives dealing with multiracial (multispecies) identity reify more that they subvert?

Building on the limiting (binary) nature of digital modalities and narratives—especially in regard to questions of race—we can point to many examples in science-fiction discourse. One thing that requires particular consideration is how these narratives posit our future digital interactions. In many examples, science fiction explores digital identity as a kind of parallel to race: the "digital divide" and liminality between nondigital natives and digital natives (there are numerous examples in the "cyberpunk" subgenre, e.g., *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*). The impact of this is all the more apparent as participation in digital narratives, both in the literal sense as well as in narrative examples, is a binary proposition (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012).

There is a basic critical implication to participation in digital narratives: the *haves* are the people—who through whatever mechanism—have access, knowledge, and the technological means to participate in the narrative. Consider the recent television reboot of the show *Battlestar Galactica*. This show pits humanity against its mechanical creation, the Cylons, who are bent on bringing about humanity's annihilation. One of the ways this conflict is framed by narrative is through the character Hera, who is the first *hybrid* offspring between a human and Cylon. Ultimately, however, it is classically framed as a question of whether this hybrid being is a harbinger of doom or the dawn of a new age. Multiracial (of in this case, multispecies) identity is seen as something that needs to be resolved toward one side of a radical dichotomy rather than embraced in its own right.

Figure 1*. Battlestar Galactica*, Athena/Helo supercut, by RascalHail (RascalHail, 2014)**.**
[Ctrl+Click title for video clip.]

Perhaps it is natural that science-fiction texts from decades past seem now less innovative—maybe even a little backward. We celebrate the starship *Enterprise*'s pan-racial crew, but we are more critical now of the head of this diverse group being an archetypical, heteronormative White male. Science fiction is unfinished, it's an ongoing discourse, it will inevitably run afoul of our hopes and expectations and garner some critique. What, and how, are problematics in regard to depictions of racial identity in the science-fiction discourse manifested? Do these problematics risk subverting their mutual critical aim? And, finally, what is success? Does solving one problem invariably create others?

Response by Roseann Pluretti

I agree with the Ryan's insightful and meaningful explanation of science fiction as a narrative of debate. Science fiction offers a discourse about the present by imagining a new future through extrapolation and defamiliarization. It also elicits self-reflection. By imagining a new future, we must transcend the current shortcomings of the present and be aware of what those shortcomings are. It is through this self-reflection of the present that science-fiction narratives not only provide a future beyond the present but a future that critiques the present. In other words, science fiction not only provides a space to imagine new worlds, technologies, and societies but also a space to critique our current society and technologies.

Reflections on current society can include critiques of power, dominance, race, and gender. Many science-fiction narratives have exhibited this through futuristic metaphors. As Ryan noted, sci-fi narratives

have tackled such issues as racial, multiracial, and gender identity and addressed how society defines these entities. It is in this respect that science fiction resembles critical studies in the academy. Critical studies examines power relations in society, focusing on who has power and who does not, and how those in power have maintained their dominance. Like critical studies, science fiction also involves a call to action. Through its futuretypes, it urges us to question the present conditions in our society, persuading us to imagine and actually to make our society better.

Science fiction also provides representations of our society that can serve as grist for debate. These representations can have a powerful influence over how we understand aspects of humanity and society, such as racial and gender identity. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, meaning is created through language, which is itself a representational system. It uses words and signs to represent thoughts and feelings and to convey these thoughts to an audience. The words, signs, or images we use to represent a concept such as multiracial identity affect how we come to understand that concept and the values and connotations associated with it. Therefore, these science-fiction representations become even more powerful because they not only question and strive to go beyond the current status quo but also to redefine key aspects of our society that are integral to human relations. For example, in *Ancillary Justice*, depicting Breq as having no gender identity or concept of gender identity urges readers to question the importance our society has placed on gender identity.

Although science-fiction narratives open the discourse to debate how our society is currently upheld, it can also fall short of fully overcoming the present's shortcomings. As Ryan illustrates, science-fiction narratives can overcome current racial and multiracial stereotypes yet continue to uphold other racial stereotypes. Does this mean that by deconstructing certain stereotypes and racial problems in society science fiction creates new problems or still upholds other stereotypes?

In response to this, I believe no science-fiction narrative could be entirely void of current stereotypes and norms, despite our high hopes. This is because these science-fiction texts are still embedded in our current culture, though their authors' eyes are fixed upon the future. Although science fiction can reimagine the present's current shortcomings, there are limits to the imagination. In the case with Captain Sisko on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, we challenged our present societal prejudices against race and included a Black captain on the crew. However, other racial stereotypes still pervaded the narrative, including the disregard for the possibility of interracial relationships. This illustrates the limits of our own imagination due to present norms and prejudices that are deeply ingrained in our society and in ourselves.

I believe that this could also be due to our perceptions of cultural norms. It is easy for us to imagine ever-evolving and imaginative future technology, science, and alternate life forms because these are unknowns that we are forever grappling to understand. Technology is accepted as something always changing and ever progressive. Science is seen as something still to be known and something that will constantly progress. On the other hand, we as a society have made certain cultural norms concrete and unchangeable, as if they are completely known and established and cannot progress from the present. Race and gender fall under these cultural norms, as we have accepted gender and racial stereotypes and norms to be almighty truths. However, we have socially defined and created representations of race and

gender. Therefore, these entities should be the easiest concepts to debate and redefine. Science fiction must continue to question this hegemonic acceptance of these racial and gender norms. Although there cannot be "better" or perfect representations of race in science fiction, these narratives should continue to strive to provide more diverse representations of race and gender that truly encapsulate the fluidity of these categories. I believe science fiction provides the best narrative platform to question these gender and racial norms for a more pluralistic future.

Response by Gideon Lichfield

Ryan raises two questions here. One is about the significance of choosing actors of certain races to play certain roles in sci-fi movies or TV shows. I won't go into this issue in detail, other than to observe that one can see these choices as statements on the evolving values of society and the willingness of those shows' producers to challenge those values. Just as contemporary theater directors may choose a White man or a woman to play Othello, *Star Trek* producers who chose a Black man or a woman to play a starship captain were challenging contemporary viewers' expectations about the status of different races, but they weren't challenging the very notion of race.

Whether the very notion of race can be challenged is Ryan's second question. I see it as related to my own provocation in this issue, which asked whether stories about aliens can ever avoid reducing to stories about human moral values and decisions. Ryan seems to be asking: Can such stories ever be free of human notions of identity, whether racial or otherwise?

The answer would seem at first sight to be no. Group identity—tribalism—is absolutely embedded in human society, back to when the first hunter-gatherer bands roamed, competing for territory and food. Race—or rather, the physical characteristics on which the concept of race is constructed—is of course just one of the countless markers (wealth, profession, dress, gender, sexuality, body size, political affiliation, etc.) we have used over the course of history to demarcate identity. And as Ryan points out, the digital divide, with its creation of digital haves and have-nots, makes for a rich new seam of identity politics.

Moreover, our notion of identity is tightly bound up with many of our moral values: We judge whether or not someone is loyal, trustworthy, generous, and so forth partly on the basis of their behavior toward a group with which they are supposed to identify. And, as I've argued, moral values are what all stories are about.

Hence the pressure Ryan identifies to resolve multiracial or multispecies identity in favor of one side or another of a binary: It's so deep in our narrative as a species that our stories don't even make sense without it. Perhaps more to the point, they're *boring* without it; if a character's identity tension ever disappears, some other source of tension has to take its place, otherwise the story ends.

This is true even in Leckie's (2014) *Ancillary Justice*, which Ryan cites. The character Breq, the former ancillary, exists in perpetual tension—conflict would be too strong a word—between (to choose a pronoun) its former collective identity and its current singleton state. Perhaps the strongest sense the reader gets of what it is emotionally like to be Breq is one of deep loneliness, the result not only of having

been separated from the other bodies who formed its Borg-like collective consciousness but also of being unique, unable to identify with anybody else—even if this trait also gives Breq insights unavailable to others. Indeed, as a science-fiction character, I would argue, Breq is not so different from Seven of Nine, the ex-member of the Borg in *Star Trek*, who—when she is not actively fighting the urge to return to the Borg—navigates a liminal identity that contains elements of both Borg and human. Like Breq, she has her own unique abilities while exuding a strong sense of implacable loneliness. In both stories, this identity tension is part of what makes the story compelling.

Where science fiction does break the mold of traditional fiction and also of human history is that it allows us to imagine the creation of entirely new identities that are not a result of the merging of two or more preexisting identities/species but the splitting of one into two or more new ones. One of the best examples has to be Bruce Sterling's (1985) *Schismatrix*, a novel in which two different philosophies of posthuman evolution have given rise to two distinct races: the Shapers, who believe in using biological/genetic techniques to modify their bodies (and who themselves end up branching into subraces), and the Mechanists, who only use nonbiological implants and augmentations. A solar-system-wide racial war ensues; ironically, it ends when a race of alien intergalactic traders make first contact, bringing such wealth with them that the posthuman races forget their differences, albeit temporarily. Racial identity is constantly shifting in *Schismatrix*—the main character is Mechanist-born, but joins the Shapers, and the story revolves around his conflicted identity and his shuttling between the two. Ultimately, the dichotomy remains unresolved; a truly joint identity is presented as impossible to attain. Once again, though, the story would be boring if it were.

Response by Aubrie Adams

At the core of Ryan's essay on defining the successes and shortcomings of expressions of multiracial identity, the following question is posed*:* Does science fiction reify more than subvert? To which he invites readers to consider evidence on both sides. In the example depicting the duo-chromatic beings from *Star Trek* as well as the role of leadership Captain Sisko embodies in *Deep Space Nine,* we see the ways critical narratives ask audience members to question and redefine current norms from a futurist perspective. Similarly, the complex characters of Spock and B'Elanna serve to subvert attitudes regarding racial norms by fully accepting their multiracial identities.

However, when it is shown that Captain Sisko is attracted to the only other Black human female on his space station, and when we are presented with Breq from *Ancillary Justice,* whose Otherness is presented as a problem that needs to be solved, we start to question the extent to which science fiction truly subverts traditional norms regarding racial expressions. To examine this issue further, one could make the case that science fiction functions to perform both roles: it reifies and subverts. One of the reasons that fiction performs a role of reification has already been acknowledged by my colleagues. Essentially, it is reasonable and expected given the ways in which current science fiction is embedded within society. Reification also provides for relatable character development and plots that at least some audience members may identify with.

Despite this potential shortcoming, I would take the stance that science fiction has the power to play a role that is remarkably subversive. Case in point, given that the norm in mass media entertainment is often to depict White males in positions of power and authority, the simple fact that Captain Sisko is a Black male (and similarly, Captain Janeway in *Star Trek: Voyager* (Berman et al, 1995–2001), is a White female) serves as an example that can abruptly subvert the norm and challenge the status quo. These examples work to pave the way for real social changes.

In fact, though these media examples may be the minority, they can perform a profoundly subversive role in society. Consider the television show *24* (Cochran & Surnow, 2001–2010). Though this show fits more neatly within the genre of a political action thriller, elements of science fiction contribute to its focus on a tactically advanced and technology-driven counterterrorism unit that fights potential threats to the United States. In the first few seasons of *24*, a Black male character, David Palmer, is elected to the role of President of the United States. At the time, the idea of a Black president still seemed like fiction in itself. However, scholars today argue that seeing a judicious and wise Black president within the context of a fictional drama helped to pave the way for broader mainstream cultural acceptance of a Black president in the oval office (Pintér, 2011). This phenomenon has been colloquially named the "Palmer effect" and may have played a role in the elections when Barack Obama was elected the first Black president in 2008.

The point is that fiction in general provides society with the opportunity to become comfortable with changing norms and expectations. Therefore, even the limited numbers of imperfect examples in which science fiction presents diverse characters in ways that can counter racial norms may prove to have dramatic effects on how we envision the present and future, and they may work as powerfully subversive forces despite imperfections.

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