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Studying the black space within speculative fiction narratives

Review: Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2011, 286 pp.

Speculative fiction is a genre that continuously expands its scope. From the Golden Age throughout the New Wave, the Cyberpunk movement, the 90s, and the early 21st century, it has been transcending literary boundaries in its never ending pursuit of exploring the human condition. Science fiction's unique aptitude for describing the human paradigm has allowed it to venture beyond its initial focus on technology and its influence on human life, and adopt a wide plethora of new themes such as religion, society, culture, ecology, feminism and ethnicity, becoming as Brian Aldiss wrote in his *Trillion Year Spree* (1986) "a search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe."[1] The unique character of science fiction pointed out by Aldiss provided much room for critical deliberations which eventually gave rise to the science fiction studies that have been systematically analysing the genre since the 1960s. But whereas some aspects of science fiction — such as gender, utopianism or alternative history — received a wide critical attention, others still remain comparatively neglected.

The subject of race and ethnicity is, in particular, frequently overlooked in the speculative fiction studies, receiving recognition only among a number of African American science fiction writers, including Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, as well as a small number of American sf critics, among them Sharon DeGraw — the author of *The Subject of Race in American Science Fiction* (2006) — and Isiah Lavender whose recently released study *Race in American Science Fiction* is the subject of this review.

Lavender's study is not only a mere addition to the often forgotten critical field but also a fresh outlook on aspects of race thanks to the employment of an unusual perspective towards the genre of science fiction. The author bases his study on the assumption that "science fiction has an unwarranted reputation for being »progressive« in matters of race and racism"[2] but "it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space" (p. 7). He arrives at the conclusion that to a large extent sf has remained "colour blind," treating discrimination in a very shallow and omissive manner (p. 18), constructing the race in a very odd way utilizing "distorted science, oversimplified science, pseudo-science, incorrect science, and out-and-out fantasy" (p. 19) deeply rooted in social Darwinism, past prejudices, and political correctness obstructing objective and unbiased presentation of race. In order to avoid such one sided outlook, Lavender proposes to analyse science fiction from the perspective of the black/white binary. He encourages the design of a new "critical method to encourage and direct attention to long-overlooked racial aspects of science fiction" (p. 19), presenting the black/white binary through the prism of otherness and black space thus eluding the influence of social Darwinism and the bias of science fiction

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[1] *Science fiction*, [entry in:] *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*, ed. J. Cuddon, London 1998, p. 791.

[2] I. Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Bloomington 2011, p. 4. All future references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

written from the white perspective, ultimately challenging "the sf community to live up to its »progressive« label" (p. 17).

The book is divided into six chapters that introduce Lavender's new method of reading the genre and focus on the re-examination of the subject of race — in the context of slavery, segregation, and race mixing narratives — analysing it from newly designed perspectives such as ethnoscapes and technicities.

The first chapter functions as an introduction to Lavender's critical method, otherhood, utilized in the analytical sections. The idea behind otherhood consists in combining the concept of otherness with identity and environment, thus creating a new mode of reading that offers a fresh perspective on the subject of race within speculative fiction. As Lavender himself explains "depiction of aliens, artificial persons, and supermen in subordinate positions, as well as its imagination of exotic landscapes and alternate histories, permits us to change and look in different ways at our cultural memory of past events" (p. 8). Otherhood is thus enstrangement through personality and environment that creates space for deliberations concerning subjectivity that in turn can be applied to race and ethnicity in both fiction and reality, "offering a new way of interpreting race and racism in sf" (p. 28), as Lavender writes stating the main objective of his study.

The study proper begins in chapter II. *Meta slavery* which focuses entirely on the theme of bondage and the significance of meta slavery narratives, which are stories depicting the issue of enslavement beyond its historical context. Lavender argues that meta slavery is an extension of otherhood that has the capacity to further broaden the critical understanding of racial relations in science fiction thanks to its outlook on servitude from the perspective of different time periods as well as various communities and cultures. He emphasizes that meta-slavery narratives "help us realize how and why racisms rip and tear the fabric of society" as they enable writers "to transcend the narrative arc between historical and literary accounts of captivity and take us into a space where the interplay of past, present, and future allows readers to experience slavery and examine the painful social divisions it has created" (p. 60). He treats meta slavery narratives as a mode that contributes to the dialogue on race and American identity, exploring "disempowerment, unconscious reflections of racism, and direct confrontations of racist attitudes displayed in sf" (p. 88) and thus becoming an essential tool in analysing the subject of race and bondage in relation to the black/white binary present within speculative fiction.

In chapter III Lavender moves to the issue of racial segregation viewed from the context of Jim Crow Laws legacy. He emphasizes how science fiction literature "explores the frontier of race through Jim Crow extrapolations" and "displays how we, as humans, fail to recognize our kinship to other humans" (p. 96), ultimately stating that science fiction possesses not only an aptitude to present complex social relations that lead to racial segregation but also the capacity to solve the problem through open dialogue and analysis provided by the unbiased "other" mood of reading. As he says himself, "Jim Crow extrapolations of otherhood may possibly be the progressive instrument required for breaking down the cultural separation between races" (p. 117).

In Chapter IV, he shifts from the issue of segregation to the subject of race mixing and its presentation in the science fiction genre. He focuses on the theme of contagious diseases and how they are projected on the issue of race mixing. Lavender argues that contagion in speculative fiction is a metaphor for racial alienation and xenophobia. The contagion, as he writes, "questions the racial power dynamics in existence by asking for whom

the crisis of racial difference is most threatening in a multicultural state" (p. 156), thus extrapolating the racial conflicts, their roots, and significance. Once again "otherhood" is employed as a means of a detached and objective analysis of the contagion metaphor probing the role and impact of race mixing in science fiction narratives.

Chapter V introduces the first of two new categories used by Lavender to analyse race and ethnicity in speculative fiction. The ethnoscape — a term coined by social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai — is basically "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live in relation to the cultural flow of social imagination across the globe" (p. 158). Lavender argues that ethnoscapes open new perspectives on social, cultural, and historical strata of race and ethnicity "offering not only new ways to understand them but new ways to imagine our world" (p. 158). He argues that ethnoscapes' significance is crucial as they transforms the understanding of specific texts and enable "to refigure the world in which we live, to perceive its ethnoscapes, and maybe even change them" (p. 185), thereby indicating that science fiction is not only a cultural commentary but also a discourse advertising change.

The final chapter introduces technicity, the second of two new categories employed by Lavender to examine race in the genre. With technicity Lavender goes back to the roots of science fiction and attempts to indicate that, despite its capacity to improve the human condition and elevate our civilization above its cultural and social struggles, technology introduces new ethnic and racial conflicts. He argues that new forms of technology do not eradicate social problems but in fact expand them. He further points out that artificial intelligence, sentient machines, androids, clones, and transhumans are new racial categories that inflame old conflicts anew. As Lavender himself states "Technicity is an unconventional way of reimagining culture, an arrival at a newer way of thinking and fresh insight about the established »truths« of difference defined by skin colour, ethnicity, and empire embedded in the racial structures of science fiction" (p. 210).

In conclusion, *Race in American Science Fiction* by Isiah Lavender is a study with several main objectives. First, it attempts to introduce a new mode of reading science fiction — otherhood — that, through defamiliarization, allows critics to read the genre without bias of ideology, social Darwinism, or the white imposed colour line. Second, it applies otherhood to examine and re-examine a variety of categories — such as slavery, segregation, race mixing, ethnoscapes and technicity — through which race and racism can be perceived. Third, it establishes otherhood as a valid critical tool by presenting its potential in the analysis of the subject of race. And fourth, it attempts to encourage the community of science fiction writers not to eradicate but to examine the evolution, fading, and expansion of racism and racial issues. As Lavender explains in the epilogue to his study "If science fiction is about social change, let us talk about how this change comes about […] and speculate about what could be, how things could be different" (p. 231).

The sheer theoretical and analytical foundation of this project is definitely enough to validate it as a significant addition to the field of racial studies within science fiction. Taking into account the inclusion of a new mode of reading the genre that synthesizes the work of well established critics such as Suvin, Aldiss, and Haraway with the philosophy of Hegel and Heiddegger, the book becomes a refreshing outlook on the subject of race and ethnicity. To conclude, *Race in American Science Fiction* is a worthy recommendation and a valuable extension of the speculative fiction studies that revisits and further broadens one of the most overlooked subjects in the field.