
Thomas, Sheree R., ed. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. New York: Warner Books, 2000. Pp. xiv, 427.

Hopkinson, Nalo, ed. *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*. Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press, 2000. Pp. xiii, 318.

Genre, like race, does not actually exist. At least, it only really exists in the act of assigning a particular label to groups of entities that share certain similar, albeit highly selected, characteristics. Whether this desire to distinguish and sort stems from a need to embrace or disgrace, to approve or reprove, the process of classification itself typically tends to ignore similarities between categorical groups, preferring instead to emphasize the differences. In the case of popular genres such as science fiction and fantasy, writer and editor Ursula K. LeGuin argues that the “definition of a genre is often an act of offence, or of retaliation” (20); the same, of course, may be said of racial classification, although admittedly with far graver consequences.

However much we may protest such abuses of science and logic, both genre and race continue to matter, especially to those who seek to exclude and denounce difference. There is another, important way in which these categories operate, however, as Le Guin also attests in her introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*. Arguing that genre is a “useful concept only when used not evaluatively but descriptively” (20), Le Guin adds that “Authors and readers of any genre form a community, with certain shared interests and expectations” (20). But, as just a glance at *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* would reveal, the community of science fiction writers, at least, has been, historically, a predominantly white one. The Norton collection, which contains over sixty stories and begins to redress the gender imbalance with its inclusion of a number of female science fiction authors, includes the work of only two black writers—predictably, Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler. As Charles R. Saunders points out in an essay collected in *Dark Matter*, “Why Blacks Should Read (And Write) Science Fiction,” it has long been assumed that African and African diasporic writers are not interested in speculative fiction, and that there is no significant black

readership for it. In an essay in the same collection, Walter Mosley speculates that this is because

Our writers have historically been regarded as a footnote best suited to address the nature of our own chains. So, if black writers wanted to branch out past the realism of racism and race, they were curtailed by their own desire to document the crimes of America. A further deterrent was the white literary establishment's desire for blacks to write about being black in a white world, a limitation imposed upon a limitation. (406)

Meanwhile, writers such as Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Ralph Ellison, Derek Walcott, Erna Brodber, Dionne Brand, Ben Okri, and many more have been working within speculative fiction conventions (using techniques often conveniently labelled magic realist) for a number of years without being embraced by the community of speculative writers.

The two anthologies reviewed here, both published in 2000, clearly announce a desire to claim a space for the work of certain black writers within this community. For her anthology *Black Matter*, Sheree R. Thomas casts a fairly wide net to collect "African diasporic speculative fiction from the past century" (Thomas xi). Nalo Hopkinson's anthology, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, more modestly presents twenty "fabulist" works written by Caribbean-born writers. Together, these anthologies not only introduce their readers to a significant, and often undervalued, body of work within the genre of speculative fiction, but also challenge us to think more creatively and critically about the construction of both race and genre.

Thomas's title, *Dark Matter*, cleverly signifies on the scientific speculation that "as much as ninety percent of the material in the universe may be objects or particles that cannot be seen" (Thomas x). Similarly, Thomas argues, "the contributions of black writers to the sf [speculative fiction] genre have not been directly observed or fully explored" (xi). Thomas's selection of "matter" for the anthology does, indeed, "shed new light on both the sf genre and the mainstream literary canon" (xi), particularly when it asks us to reconsider the work of "mainstream" writers such as Charles W. Chesnutt, W.E.B. Du Bois, Amiri Baraka, and Ishmael Reed in terms of their contributions to the speculative genre. Chesnutt's "The Goopherd Grapevine" (1887) has been widely collected in American literature anthologies, but here it is re-presented by Thomas as horror fiction, arguably a subset of the speculative genre. In "The Comet" (1920), a more obscure work by a distinguished American writer and scholar, Du Bois uses a science fiction scenario—the annihilation of most of New York City's inhabitants by the tail of a comet—to speculate upon

how the barriers of racial segregation might dissolve if the last two remaining humans on earth were a black man and a white woman. It is perhaps less surprising to encounter a short story by Amiri Baraka and an excerpt from the novel *The Terrible Twos* by Ishmael Reed in this anthology. Baraka and Reed, while not usually categorized as speculative writers, have consistently rejected naturalistic and realistic techniques in favour of narrative and thematic innovation, and their inclusion in the anthology only highlights this generic tendency.

Readers looking for more revelations of this sort, however, will be disappointed. Of the twenty-nine stories and five essays collected in the anthology, approximately twenty stories are published here for the first time. One can either fault Thomas for not digging more deeply into the recent past (where, for example, are Morrison, Kincaid, Brand?) or applaud her inclusion of work written by less recognized contemporary black speculative fiction writers. Perhaps the real problem lies in the overly ambitious subtitle of the anthology: *A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. At any rate, this anthology obviously belongs to a new generation of writers whose work not only gains credibility by being collected with the likes of Du Bois and Baraka, not to mention Delany and Butler, but sometimes surpasses these better-known writers in sheer invention and energy. Indeed, if anything concretely distinguishes *Dark Matter* from *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, it is the consistent attention paid, in the former, by this new generation of writers, clearly influenced by the signifying practices of their elders, to the musical quality and subversive potential of language. And when signifyin' meets sf, as it does in stories by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Jewell Gomez, Evie Shockley, Leone Ross, Tananarive Due, Anthony Joseph, Nalo Hopkinson, Kalamu ya Salaam, Nisi Shawl, Robert Fleming, Derrick Bell, and Darryl Smith, to name just a few of these new voices, the result is work that pushes the speculative genre in astonishing directions.

All of the writers collected in *Dark Matter* answer Saunders' call for black writers of speculative fiction to "serve a function similar [to] that of the bard or the griot in ways 'literary' writers cannot approach," and "to unleash our imaginations to tell our own sf and fantasy stories" (404). The stories collected feature black characters as protagonists in roles traditionally occupied by whites in speculative fiction, whether it is the vampire in Jewelle Gomez's "chicago 1927," the clone in Tananarive Due's "Like Daughter," the astral travellers in Kalamu ya Salaam's "Buddy Bolden," or the robots in Darryl A. Smith's "The Pretended." The latter story, along with "Black No More" (an excerpt from the 1931 novel of the same name by George S. Schuyler), Derrick Bell's "The Space Traders," and "separation anxiety" by Evie

Shockley, also uses science fiction devices to perform thought experiments on the issue of racism. In Smith's moving, eloquent story, a young robot named Mnemosyne finds herself, along with all other robots, on a train to oblivion, wondering why she and the other robots have been ordered to self-destruct. Her memory circuits trace the path to this command through a history that has resulted in the extinction of black people from the earth and a subsequent "enterprise" to create robotic servants in the image of the extinct race. As Mnemosyne reminds her friend, Diva Eve,

They thought robots was a good way to make believe that you was black but not people after they couldn't pretend no more with real black people. Jes take thinkin outa real black people brains, put it into computers, rase the memory a bit, make our talk the way they think it should sound, and piss the whole kit'n'kaboodle into robots. (362)

Ironically, however, these "robotic subalternistics" (363) serve only to intensify white guilt and discomfort. Diva Eve suggests that the reason for the failure of the "Afridyne" (359) experiment is that "they [white people] been pretendin black aint people for so long, they accidentally builded machines that reminded em that they was jes pretendin all along" (364). In a final, futile act of rebellion, Mnemosyne refuses to terminate herself and forces her "masters" to see her humanity and to reckon with her agency. In very different stories, Derrick Bell and Evie Shockley demonstrate that the viability of racial classification and oppression depends utterly on white surveillance and privilege. In a terse political allegory, Bell imagines what would happen if an alien force arrived on earth, offering technological advancement and wealth in exchange for the African-American population of the United States. Shockley projects an America of the future in which blacks are coerced into almost complete segregation from the white population, ostensibly in an effort to preserve their unique culture, but really so that they can be managed and controlled by a racist government.

The theme of Shockley's story raises a significant issue with respect to an anthology like *Black Matter*. Does such a project extend the range of speculative fiction by introducing readers to new writers in the genre, or does it serve merely to ghettoize these writers? The latter tendency has long been a concern of Samuel R. Delany, one of the most prominent African-American writers of speculative fiction. In an essay collected in *Dark Matter* that appears to pull in a different direction from that of Saunders, Delany argues that the systemic racism of North American society has not only prevented full, unqualified recognition of black writers' work, including his own, but it has also resulted

in a failure to recognize the affinity that his work shares with white writers, particularly those that have emerged in the sub-genre of cyberpunk. Delany cites numerous instances of what he calls “both racism and sexism” in the science fiction world, and he questions the automatic labelling of his work:

as long as racism functions *as* a system, it is still fuelled by aspects of the perfectly laudable desires of interested whites to observe this thing, however dubious its reality, that exists largely by means of its having been named: African-American science fiction. (395)

In making a claim that “black writers have been offering distinctive speculative visions to the world far longer than is generally thought” (xii), Thomas may well be promoting such ghettoization. However, the challenge remains one of finding a venue for the work of new African-American and African diasporic writers whose themes and characters are not deemed “mainstream” enough for publishers.

Thomas’ anthology concludes with a brilliant autobiographical performance piece by Paul D. Miller, “a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid” and a brief essay by Octavia E. Butler, a writer referred to by Charles R. Saunders as “a second giant to stand beside Delany” (399). Butler’s quiet, meditative thoughts on what it means to be alien, and what it will mean for humanity to meet aliens, stand in stark contrast to Miller’s informal, energetic riff on what it means to be a black male in American culture. However, that is precisely the strength of this anthology: by showcasing the work of a new generation of African and African diasporic writers of speculative fiction in the context of an established tradition, Thomas’ anthology should ultimately succeed in creating a new audience for both.

While Nalo Hopkinson’s anthology, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, serves a similar purpose to that of *Dark Matter*, in that it shows us an established tradition as well as an emerging body of work, it has a much narrower geographical focus. Like Thomas, Hopkinson is also a writer of speculative fiction: in fact, two of her stories are collected in *Dark Matter*. In these stories, “Greedy Choke Puppy” and “Ganger (Ball Lightning),” Hopkinson demonstrates the elasticity of the speculative genre. In “Greedy Choke Puppy,” Hopkinson draws on Caribbean folklore to present a horror story about a young woman who is warned by her grandmother that her impatience and greed for life may have unhappy consequences. In a dark, fairy tale conclusion to the story, the older woman must kill her granddaughter, whose intemperance has turned her into a predatory “soucouyant” or “blood-sucker” (*Dark Matter* 106). In “Ganger (Ball Lightning),” a young couple’s experimentation with body-suits intended to enhance sexual

pleasure turns into a horrific nightmare when one of the suits comes to life and stalks the couple. Hopkinson includes one of her own stories in *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, as well: in “Glass Bottle Trick,” a brilliant, psychological interpretation of the Bluebeard story, a young newlywed woman learns a horrible truth about her darkly handsome husband.

These stories—drawing as much from Asian, European, and Caribbean folklore as they do from the contemporary horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres—typify the eclecticism of the works collected in Hopkinson’s anthology. In her introduction, Hopkinson admits that, as she began to receive contributions, she had to revise her own presuppositions, informed by North American media and culture, about the speculative genre. In the end, though, she admits that

many of those pieces did capture some of the feel I wanted. I had to come up with the words to explain why. Finally I came to the conclusion that *fabulist* was exactly the right word to describe the anthology. The stories invoke a sense of fable. Sometimes they are fantastical, sometimes absurd, satirical, magical, or allegorical. (xii)

The works collected here, Hopkinson tells us in her introduction, are all by writers with a Caribbean background, mostly from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana, the areas with which Hopkinson is most familiar (xi). As such, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* redresses an imbalance in *Dark Matter*. Although the latter claims to represent African diasporic literature, its focus is primarily on American writers (notable exceptions in *Dark Matter* are Leone Ross from Jamaica and Anthony Joseph from Trinidad, both now based in the U.K., and, of course, Hopkinson herself). Like Thomas, Hopkinson includes both well-established writers, such as Wilson Harris, Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior, Kamau Brathwaite, and H. Nigel Thomas, as well as some who are less familiar to the audience for either Commonwealth or speculative literature. About half the stories appear here for the first time; of the rest collected, the earliest is Wilson Harris’s “Yurokon,” first published in 1970.

Hopkinson has organized the twenty stories in her collection into various categories in an effort to capture their themes and styles, and she provides a brief, introductory commentary before each story. In this way, she imposes order upon eclecticism, even as she cautions her reader to approach the anthology “in the spirit of breaking the rules” (xiii). This tension between order and chaos also characterizes many of the stories in the collection, as characters struggle, along with readers, to discern the deeper, often spiritual, meaning of events. The opening story, Marcia Douglas’s “What the Periwinkle Remember,” is about Bella, a woman in an asylum whose insanity

is re-envisioned as the manifestation of a pan-African female identity. Marina ama omowale maxwell's "Devil Beads, in which a sudden, mysterious, and inexorable spiritual force begins to grip all of the children of the African diaspora, closes the collection. The stories between range from Wilson Harris' mystical, delightfully perplexing "Yurokon" (Harris attempts to explain this story in the Contributors' Notes to the anthology) to Roger McTair's more conventional, indeed, old-fashioned, "Just a Lark (or the Crypt of Matthew Ashdown)."

Some of the stories in this anthology describe hauntings of one sort or another, whether it is the haunting of a daughter by a mother (or is it the reverse?) in Jamaica Kincaid's powerful, lyrical "My Mother," or the haunting of an abusive husband and father by his late wife in "The Village Cock" by H. Nigel Thomas. But these stories aside, the overall effect of the collection, however much one may wish to resist the urge to exoticize or Gothicize this region, is a sense of the Caribbean itself as a haunted space. Perhaps this is inevitable in a collection of fabulist fiction, in which supernatural elements are inevitable. We are encouraged, perhaps, to take literally the claim of the narrator in Ismith Khan's "Shadows Move in the Britannia Bar" that "the island's history is written on the rum casks, the walls, the floors, the brass spittoons, and, most of all, the men who gather there, held and drawn like puppets by thin strings of time and memory" (113). But this idea of haunting, in a historical sense, is most strong in Tobias S. Buckell's "Spurn Babylon." In this story, the past, in the form of a sunken slave ship, literally rises out of the sea, not to reclaim its victims, but to repatriate all victims of the holocaust of the Middle Passage. The story is related by a businessman, an outsider to the island of St. Thomas, who can scarcely believe his eyes or his ears until the spirit of the ship, christened *Little Garvey*, captures him as well. The narrator finally realizes what draws the island's inhabitants to the project of refitting the ship for the journey from Babylon to Zion: "Somehow they had all managed to subvert that horrible legacy, the slave ship and what it represented, from the past and take it with them proudly into a new future" (48).

Some of the most haunting stories in this anthology have less to do with ghosts than they do with the horror of loss. In "Widows' Walk," Opal Palmer Adisa writes compellingly of the plight of a woman who fears her husband is lost at sea, lost to a rival she calls Yemoja, the "beautiful ooman" (168). The power of her love and his faithfulness, however, return him to her. The character of the protagonist, June-Plum, is drawn so intricately by Adisa that the reader shares both her grief and her joy; at the same time, we are compelled to recognize the universality of the simple, elemental longing of lovers parted by distance and circumstance. For different reasons, readers may be haunted

by Pamela Mordecai's "Once on the Shores of the Stream Senegambia." As readers, we share the first-person narrator's gradual recognition of her plight: she has been drugged and captured, and is being forced, along with other black women, to gestate white babies within her womb. In spite of its seemingly improbable premise, this story succeeds both at the metaphorical and the literal level. In either a vision or a memory—the lines between reality and drug-induced hallucination are ambiguously drawn—the narrator hears an old black woman say, "Now they raising human being like pig and chicken. Soon they going to tell we who to breed and who to barren. And I know who belly they going lock down first" (175). Like Tananarive Due in her story "Like Daughter," collected in *Dark Matter*, Mordecai extrapolates from current technological "advances," in this case to imagine a world in which the service role to which many black women have historically been relegated is taken to its ultimate, shocking limit.

Mordecai's story is one of only a few in *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root* that might properly be called science fiction. The others in this anthology that may qualify for this distinction include "Uncle Obadiah and the Alien" by Geoffrey Philp and "Soma" by Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar. Antonio Benítez-Rojo's story, "Buried Statues," might likewise be classified as fantasy. But it is clear that Hopkinson's intent in this anthology is to suggest that making these clear-cut distinctions among works of the imagination blinds us to the variegated richness of all fiction. By featuring Mordecai's story alongside those of Brathwaite, Senior, and Walcott, Hopkinson suggests, as I claim above, that the speculative genre need be neither rigid nor exclusive: such a liberation of the genre as is witnessed in both anthologies is sure to attract new readers to both speculative and postcolonial fiction.

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Works Cited

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