

Rac(e)ing into the Future:

Looking at Race in Recent Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels for Young Adults by Black Authors

My elementary school librarian introduced me to science fiction and fantasy when I was in third grade by showing us a filmstrip of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, a classic tale about good versus evil and how love can conquer much of what ails the world. I was so amazed by this filmstrip because it created an environment that was pleasing to me—traveling through the sky, visiting other dimensions of space and time; it offered power to the powerless—three children were the only ones capable of saving their father from being forever lost in another world and, ultimately, saving that world from a loveless, lifeless fate. But I was also drawn to L'Engle's books because I identified with her characters. Like me, they were smart, often misunderstood, and in the case of the character Calvin O'Keefe, poor. And, then, there was also the mother, Dr. Murry, who had a Ph.D. in physics, spent quality time with her children, and did significant work that mattered to the world. After the filmstrip was over, I checked the book out and read the whole time travel series. I decided, in third grade, that I wanted to have a life like that of Meg Murry and her mother, a life of the mind—an opportunity to think, to dream, to do.

I continued to read science fiction and fantasy throughout my childhood, young adult, and adult life. But, eventually, I caught on to the fact that although I could identify in many ways with the

characters in science fiction and fantasy novels, in one important way *I* was missing. Where were the Black authors and characters who blazed across the galaxy, spilled into dimensions of space, and warped through time? Where were Black girls who fed dragons, petted unicorns, or slept in castles? Aside from the earliest offerings—Virginia Hamilton's Justice Trilogy (1978, 1980, 1981), Walter Dean Myer's *The Legend of Tarik* (1981), and Joyce Carol Thomas's novels, *Water Girl* (1986) and *Journey* (1988)—it has been nearly impossible to find science fiction and fantasy with protagonists or secondary characters of color written for young adults by Black authors. And, most recently, comprehensive studies of African American children's and young adult literature (Bishop 2007, Brooks and McNair 2008, Smith 1994) can only reference the dearth rather than analyze the novels of Black authors who write in these genres.

In their 2003 study of middle school genre fiction, Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, and Gilmore-Clough found that of 976 reviews of youth fantasy novels, only 6 percent featured protagonists or secondary characters

of color, and that of the 387 reviews of youth science fiction, only 5 percent featured protagonists or secondary characters of color. Not surprising, considering that publishing industry overviews provided by the Cooperative Children's Book Center suggest that, each year, the publication of multicultural books

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falls far behind the growing multicultural population in the United States. Yet, as the publishing industry opens its doors more widely to adult science fiction/fantasy writers like L.A. Banks, Stephen Barnes, Tananarive Due, and Nalo Hopkinson, we are seeing the door inch forward so that more Black writers are given the opportunity to fill this void in youth literature as well.

Filling this void is important for several reasons.

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Studies have shown that, in the general population, science fiction and fantasy literature has an impact on the teaching of values and critical literacy to young adults (Bucher and Manning, 2001; Cox, 1990; Porthero, 1990). According to Bucher and Manning, the appeal is in the imagination that “comes into play as science fiction challenges readers to first imagine and then to realize the future of not only the novel they are reading but, also its juxtaposition the world in which they live” (42). For Walter Mosley, noted African American author of adult science fiction and detective novels, filling this void is necessary because it is a literature that speaks to children and young adults. He claims that science fiction, in particular, has the power to “tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised or simply by asking, What if?” (“Black to the Future” 32). This literature also gives students of all races and ethnicities an opportunity to explore what their world might be like in the future *while* portraying a future that is an accurate representation of the array of brown people within the global community.

For author Maiya Williams, writing in these genres is as much about destroying subtle messages as it is about having fun. She recalls reading “fun” genres like mysteries, fantasy, and science fiction and noticing that the protagonists were always White:

If the protagonist was black you could be sure the story was going to be about racism. Either that, or it was a folk tale. After a while I began to find this irritating. The subtle message I was getting was that white kids are allowed to have wonderful, fantastic adventures, while the only thing Black kids can do is suffer and battle oppression. . . . So

I ended up avoiding the books that were deemed “black literature.” . . . So my goal [is] to show characters of all hues and cultures engaged in exciting adventures, without racism being the driving point of the story. (<http://www.maiyawilliams.com/faq.html>)

Since 2004, several Black authors, Maiya Williams included, have published books of science fiction and fantasy featuring Black youth as protagonists. An analysis of these books reveals plots that are fun and adventurous; black protagonists who are gifted, insightful youth surrounded by functional, supportive family units; and themes common to the sci-fi-fantasy genre, like courage, integrity, and good versus evil. But an analysis also reveals that the books written by these authors approach “blackness” as a normative experience. While race and ethnicity are not ignored in these books, the race or ethnicity of a character does not drive the plot.

Maiya Williams’s book *The Golden Hour* (2004), the first in a time travel trilogy that also includes *The Hour of the Cobra* (2006) and *The Hour of the Outlaw* (2007), places at the center a White brother and sister, Rowan and Nina Popplewell, who befriend the Black twins Xavier and Xanthe Alexander during a brief family visit in Maine. The foursome is drawn to each other and spends time together, only to discover that the small town that they are visiting provides a portal to travel back in time. *The Golden Hour* introduces Xanthe Alexander’s race in this manner:

A girl handed him a towel. She looked about his age, with brown skin and hair plaited into hundreds of beaded braids, all the same length, that hung down to her chin. Her brown eyes were almond shaped. To Rowan, she looked like an ancient Egyptian princess, except for the cutoff overalls. (31)

Alexander is introduced as having brownish red hair and being two inches taller than Xavier. In further discussion between the teenagers, it is revealed that the twins are so smart that rather than have them skip grades in public school, their parents chose to homeschool them. When the Popplewells meet the twins’ grandmother, we discover through her accent and ethnically prepared dinner that she is of Jamaican descent.

The plot then focuses on the Popplewells and their grief over the untimely death of their mother. Race is not mentioned again until the Popplewells and the Alexanders discuss when in time they would travel if they are allowed to use the time travel

machines. Xavier comments, “We just have to make sure that we choose a time and place that was good to brown skinned people. . . . I don’t want to be stuck picking cotton” (73). Rowan, Xanthe, and Alexander aren’t given an opportunity to choose, however; they must travel back in time to France during the French Revolution in order to retrieve Nina, who they believe has traveled there to meet Mozart. Here, the teenagers realize that they will have to take on racialized and gendered personas that befit the time period. Xanthe is told that she will act as an artist because it was a good occupation for a woman, and she is told, “Your skin color will make you seem exotic and exciting” (89). Xavier, on the other hand, protests that he will have to act as a freed slave in the service of Rowan, who will act as a noble. The teens are provided with the following explanation by the town librarian: “Well, there weren’t that many black people in Revolutionary France,” Miss O’Neill explained. “Some of the French had slaves, but unlike Americans, they didn’t keep them in their own country. Slave labor was limited to the Carribean colonies, where they needed the manpower for their crops” (89).

Although, Xavier does not like the idea, he complies because they can only remain in Revolutionary France for a maximum of seven days. Yet, while in France, there is no indication that Xavier’s race or status as a slave are deterrents to searching for Nina. As a matter of fact, his status as a slave allows him entry into the servant quarters, where he is able to bond with the other servants over the plight of the servant class and gather gossip that is useful in their search for Nina.

So although race is acknowledged throughout Williams’s trilogy, it is not presented as a burden to the characters and, in many cases, works to their advantage during their time travels. Williams provides exciting adventures for her readers, as well as characters who don’t deny race or the historical implications of race, but rather are allowed within the context of their lives and their time travels to be unhindered by the racism that may be present.

Twelve-year-old Charlemagne Althea Mack tackles both the issues of racism and classism at the beginning of Stephen Jones’s novel *Charlemagne Mack: Rise of the Queen* (2007), the first of a planned trilogy. Jones establishes Charlemagne’s race and intelligence within the first few pages of the book:

Alana was a lot like me except instead of being African-American with a short dreadlock hair style, Alana was Mexican-American. . . . We both were Honors students and had a lot of the same classes. The classes for the smart kids—the “colored eggs.” That’s what some of the other students, and even some of the teachers, called us. We were mostly black and Mexican kids. The “colored” part came from what they used to call black people way back in the day. The “egg” part came from what they used to call really smart people like Albert Einstein and Oprah Winfrey: eggheads. (6)

It is clear that a class system exists within Charlemagne’s school. There are those students who are intelligent, take Honors classes, and are given some hope of leaving their inner city neighborhood. And there are those students that the “colored eggs” tend to stay away from—the kids who are passing time until they eventually go to jail—because it is the safest thing to do.

Charlemagne’s gifts go beyond the academic. She is also a talented gymnast, with a scholarship to a gymnastics club on the more affluent side of town. Charlemagne is convinced that her talent will be rewarded with the position of team leader. Yet, when she and her uncle arrive at the club for the competition, it is quite clear that wealth, and not talent, divides Charlemagne from her nearest competitor, Anna. Although Anna has a personal trainer, her routine does not outshine Charlemagne’s, and yet, Anna is awarded the position of team leader. The club manager makes it very clear that it is Anna’s money that has won her the position: “Anna’s family brings a lot to this club . . . including money and influence that Charlemagne here clearly benefits from through a full scholarship, which includes her uniforms” (11). Although these scenes open the book, the race and class issues are made less burdensome by the immense emotional support and guidance that Charlemagne receives from her uncle and aunt. Charlemagne is clearly unhappy with her circumstances and must come to terms with the fact that a meritocracy often exists in theory only, but her family gives her words of encouragement and model living a life of dignity while overcoming the daily obstacles that African Americans face.

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Not only does this harsh truth seem to usher Charlemagne into adulthood, but on the night that she loses to Anna, Charlemagne narrowly escapes an attack from the Hunters, creatures of darkness who want to capture Charlemagne in order to gain control and power over the universe. Once whisked away to safety, Charlemagne's family reveals to her that she is the Queen of the Sky Conjuring People and has been in open hiding for twelve years. Reeling from the attack and the loss at the gymnastics club, Charlemagne responds, "Can't no black girl ever be queen of nothin'" (18). Charlemagne is again shored up by family support, with dignity. Her aunt reminds Charlemagne to use correct grammar before stating, "It is your history, it is your birthright, and it is your destiny! So do not *dare* to sit there and tell me little black girls can't be queens because you, dear girl, were *born* a queen!" (18).

Early in the novel, Jones provides a race and class foundation for Charlemagne that surely inner city readers can identify with. Charlemagne occasionally feels trapped by circumstances of poverty and race, but Jones makes it clear that Charlemagne has, within herself, the necessary tools to acquire another kind of existence, despite life's obstacles. Once Charlemagne is able to grapple with her earthbound battle of race and class, she goes on to successfully battle evil throughout the galaxy.

The Marvelous Effect (2007) is the first in Troy CLE's planned Marvelous World Series. In this offering, thirteen-year-old Louis Proof awakens from a summer-long coma only to realize that he, with some help from his best friend Brandon and his young cousin Lacey, has the power to drive extraterrestrial beings back to their planet, Midlandia, before they completely restructure Earth and the way that people think about evil and committing evil acts. Louis Proof is a popular kid with a close-knit, supportive family; like any other typical American kid, he loves video games, fast food, and amusement parks. The emphasis of CLE's novel is placed on the action, familial support, friendship, and loyalty. For the most part, he makes no direct comments on race as a category or concept in this action-packed sci-fi novel. In chapter

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three, where the décor of Louis's room is described, the reader realizes that Louis is a NASCAR fan:

The blue walls were covered with everything from hip-hop stars to comic book characters such as Spawn, SpiderMan, and Wolverine. Most of his friends considered it odd that he had posters of Dale Earnhardt Sr. and Jr. on his wall. They didn't understand why he cared about NASCAR. Louis believed that NASCAR was one of the fastest and most dangerous sports. (39)

Here, the reader might infer that Louis's friends don't understand his love for NASCAR because car racing is a sport that has been historically dominated by White men. The assumption, of course, is that NASCAR could not possibly have a place for him or people like him. Yet Louis, an avid radio-control car builder and racer, does not let the race of NASCAR drivers deter him from appreciating the sport or aspiring to it. The only other inference that the reader might make is to Louis's other best friend, Angela, who has traveled to Hollywood to star in a movie as Denzel Washington's daughter.

Although race is not a significant factor in the first book of CLE's series, we know that CLE wrote the book with race at the forefront of his mind. He has repeated in numerous interviews that the inspiration for his book was the movie *The Goonies*. He admits to wanting to be a Goonie as a child, but only being one in his heart. He states, "I was like, you know what? I'm going to write a book that is where I could be the kid going on the adventure. . . . I was a part of them [referring to sci-fi fantasy books and movies], but we really didn't see ourselves" (Interview 2007). In *The Marvelous Effect*, CLE has created a novel that allows Black readers to see themselves as adventuresome, talented young people about the business of saving the world. Again, race is not a factor that should be considered burdensome; race just simply is—it is normative and, therefore, not a liability.

In Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's *Zahrah the Wind-seeker* (2005), difference, not race or ethnicity, drives the plot. Difference is a major factor in this story about thirteen-year-old Zahrah, who is born *dada* (with dreadlocks). Everyone in Zahrah's community knows that she is special, but most are not sure how

she is special. Will her gifts bring harm or good to her community? This novel is a blend of both science fiction and fantasy, presenting a futuristic planet, Ginen, and the Ooni Kingdom, which resembles what could be thought of as a lush, parallel universe-type Nigeria. Most of the kids with their perfectly coifed afros tease Zahrah about her locs that are intertwined with vines growing out of her head and tell her that bad luck comes to those who come near her. But Zahrah is constantly encouraged to see herself as special by her best friend, Dari, and many of the adults in the community.

In the prologue, Zaharah remarks on the regions of the Ooni Kingdom. Those in the north, where she lives, are obsessively concerned with their looks and have an array of mirrors, some even sewn onto their clothing. Those who live in the northwest cook all day and most of the night and are “gloriously fat” (x). Those who live in the southwest are obsessed with beads and wear them in their hair, on their bodies, and on their clothes. The people of the southeast are metalworkers with soot on their faces; those of the northeast are architects and scientists, driven by technology. These regional differences are accepted as just that, differences. But it is Zahrah’s hair, a rare occurrence throughout the Ooni Kingdom, that puzzles and frightens people. Zahrah finds all of the differences simply interesting rather than wrong.

As the novel unfolds, Zahrah’s gifts, including her ability to fly, are unveiled. She is forced to surrender her self-doubts and personal fears when Dari is bitten by a war snake and falls into a deep coma. The antidote can only be found in the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, a place where unspeakable things grow, live, and happen. Few who enter the Forbidden Greeny Jungle return, and those who do return are insane. Here, Zahrah must go on a quest not only for the antidote, but for the person that she is—dada and Windseeker.

There are a few other options for sci-fi and fantasy fans out there. *Shadow Speaker*, also by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, is a science fiction and fantasy novel about a young girl in the Ooni Kingdom who uses her powers to hear the shadows and embarks on a quest to thwart a war. Also check out *47*, by Walter Mosley, a science fiction novel about slavery set on a plantation before the Civil War.

Young adults who are Black can relate to the experiences in science fiction and fantasy novels. Indeed, they crave these experiences and read these

genres just as voraciously as young adults of other races. But the lack of self-images in this literature can have a negative effect on the psyche of young readers. We derive our perceptions of self by what we hear, see, and read.

Scholar Karen Patricia Smith believes that literature has the potential to alter negative perceptions and calls for more literature written by Blacks that depict positive intergenerational images and issues; gifted and talented African Americans; Blacks who live outside of the United States; middle class protagonists; unified Black families; and science fiction and fantasy worlds.

I believe that the few science fiction and fantasy books that are now being published by Black authors are filling this bill. Writers like Maiya Williams and Troy CLE have chosen science fiction and fantasy as their genre because they remember the desire they had as young people to see themselves mirrored there. All of the authors discussed in this article embrace the fantastic while also embracing intact family units, intergenerational support and relationships, and gifted and talented protagonists who can take on the world without carrying it on their shoulders. Race in literature for Black young adults can be important without being a burden.

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Gallo Grants

The Gallo Grants were established in 2003 by former ALAN Award and Hipple Award recipient Don Gallo to encourage educators in their early years of teaching to attend the ALAN Workshop for the first time. The grants provide funding—up to \$500 each—for two classroom teachers in middle school or high school each year to attend the ALAN Workshop. (The amount of a grant may be less than \$500 if the applicant lives within commuting distance of the convention location where airfare and housing would not be necessary.)

The Workshop is held at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English on the Monday and Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving Day. Applicants must be teaching full-time; must have been classroom teachers for less than five years prior to the year in which they are applying; and must not have attended an ALAN Workshop previously. Membership in ALAN is not required for consideration, though applicants are expected to become ALAN members if they receive this grant.

Each applicant must fill out the grant application form and submit an essay of no more than 750 words explaining their interest in Young Adult Literature, what they hope to gain by attending this year's ALAN Workshop, and how they hope to use the experience in their classrooms in the future. A letter of support must also come from the applicant's school system. **The deadline for submission is September 1.** Applicants will be judged on their ability to articulate their understanding of the value of Young Adult Literature as well as their explanation of how they intend to use YA books and the information they gather at the Workshop in their own classrooms.

For further information about this grant, contact ALAN Executive Secretary Gary Salvner at galsalvner@ysu.edu or 330-941-3414. Information about the ALAN Workshop may be obtained from the ALAN Website—www.alan-ya.org. Information about the NCTE Convention may be obtained on the NCTE Website—www.ncte.org—or by writing to NCTE Headquarters at 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.