

DESEGREGATING THE FUTURE: A STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
PARTICIPATION IN SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze African-American participation in science fiction fan culture at science fiction conventions. My inquiry will include four main sections involving how and why African-Americans seem to be underrepresented at science fiction conventions in comparison to their proportion of the general population. These include a brief history of science fiction conventions, an exploration of the possible reasons for African-Americans who read science fiction literature or watch the television shows and movies would chose not to participate in science fiction conventions, some examples of positive portrayals of black characters in both science fiction literature and visual media, and the personal observations of my research subjects on their experiences regarding attending science fiction conventions. My research methodology included personal interviews with several African-American science fiction fans and authors, an interview with a white science fiction fan who is very familiar with the history of fan culture. I also draw upon scholarship in the science fiction studies, cultural anthropology and critical race theory.

This work is dedicated to: my late Mother, Eldora Read Testerman,  
For getting me my first library card when I was six years old,  
For reading to me, and for encouraging me to do well in school;  
And my Father, Raymond Lee Testerman, who let me watch Star Trek,  
Lost in Space and The Twilight Zone.

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## INTRODUCTION

When we speak of American culture, we each know what we mean by the term. From an individual perspective, the culture in which one lives appears to be monolithic. However, when different segments within a large, diverse society are taken into account, this appearance is more illusory than factual. As if issues such as race, gender, age or religious or ethnic background are not sufficient dividing lines to produce subcultures within American culture, chosen areas of interest based on entertainment choices also play a role producing a bewildering panorama of cultures within a single nation.

Clifford Geertz wrote that “. . . culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior” (Geertz 11). If this is so, how do we reconcile the different structures, or rules, that apply to these divergent subcultures? In particular, do the “rules” of a particular subculture based on an affinity for a particular genre of entertainment – in the case of this thesis, science fiction – say anything about the racial background permitted in its ranks?

Specifically, I am investigating the cultural practices of science fiction fans, particularly the segment of science fiction fans that attend science fiction conventions. My question is whether there is any specific subcultural practice or overt prejudice within the science fiction fan community that would explain African-Americans’ low participation in this arena of fan activity. If such overt pressure from within the fan community against Black participation does not exist, what other factors either within fan communities or coming from the wider culture could account for this observed low participation? For the purpose of this thesis I will use both the terms black and African-American, as both terms have been used in scholarly texts both in the past and in the present, although African-American as a term is more specific. Black can refer to many different

groups from many locations, whereas African-American refers to those of African descent, mainly those descendants of former slaves, who are American citizens. Where I use the term black in this work, unless I note otherwise I am referring to African-Americans.

### Framing the Question Through the Lens of Personal Experience

My motivation for undertaking this research project stems from more than thirty years of active participation in science fiction fan conventions, and the personal observations I have made throughout those years. From the first convention I attended, I was struck by how few African-American faces I saw. I had been expecting something roughly approaching the demographics of the region I was in, and as I was attending college in Bowling Green, Kentucky, at the time, that region included Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia. What I saw at that first convention in Chattanooga in January of 1980 was a far cry from the racial mix I saw in the general population or even in my college classes. Out of a body of convention attendees numbering between 200 and 400, I remember seeing only one black person.

This bothered me. One of the aspects of science fiction as a genre – whether in literature, film or television – that has always appealed to me is how those divisions of gender, race or any other binary that we as humans have used as a basis for discrimination seemed to have been overcome. Television programs such as *Star Trek* and novels such as F. M. Busby's *Zelde M'Tana*, among others depicted future worlds that, despite other problems, had at least solved the problem of racial inequality. Based on what I saw as the social aspects of the genre, I was puzzled. Was my assessment of science fiction wrong? If not, where were the black fans that I had expected to see?

One possibility I considered, both at the time and since, was how stereotypes may have been at play. More than racial stereotypes are involved here, though racial stereotypes are part of the mix. Reading science fiction and participating in fan activities such as conventions will likely earn

a person the label of nerd. Could this be a possible factor in keeping blacks out of fandom, and if so, why does this seem to not concern white fans as much? Stereotypes are central to racial projects, and as Omi and Winant say, “. . . indeed the whole gamut of racial stereotypes – that ‘white men can’t jump,’ that Asians can’t dance, etc., etc. – all testify to the way a racialized social structure shapes racial experience and conditions meaning” (Omi and Winant 59). Ideas of essentialism and social construction of race come into play here as well, as Ian Hacking ably describes: essentialism being the concept that race is part of an individual’s essence, and social construction being the idea that the larger society constructs and enforces the supposed characteristics of race (Hacking 16-17). While the concept of essentialism is used more globally by other scholars and in other contexts, for the purpose of this study Hacking’s definition works the best.

My personal motivation for looking at issues of race goes back even further than my early experiences in science fiction fandom. When I was to start Kindergarten, my family lived in a predominantly black area of Columbus, Ohio, and I was one of a handful of white children in my first elementary school classroom. From Kindergarten through fifth grade, I had first-hand experience of being in the minority and life as the Other. Being bookish and not athletic did not help, and the music my family listened to was not what the families of my schoolmates enjoyed. The summer before sixth grade, we moved to a suburb, and I relished the thought of being a member of the majority, thinking that would be my ticket to enough social status to have more than one friend at a time. What I discovered was that my bookish nature, coupled with my lack of athleticism – the most valued social coinage in that time and place – kept me at the same low status that I had occupied before. In other words, my nerdhood trumped race in both environments. My early personal experience, as well as my observations of the racial makeup of fandom as I

witnessed it since the late 1970s, has made me particularly sensitive to the black-white race dynamic in ways far different than my awareness of issues involving other racial minorities, although I know those issues exist. For this reason, as well as to maintain a tighter focus in my research, I have concentrated on African-Americans in the science fiction community, although the Asian-American, Latino and Native American population within this subculture is also lower than their percentage of the entire population of the United States.

Since my first experiences with science fiction fan culture I have considered several other possible reasons for this seeming lack of black participation, among them the lingering effects of segregated education and Jim Crow laws. While these two possible answers are beyond the scope of this research project, I will touch upon other possible answers. Although I will briefly discuss possible reasons for the African-American community to distrust science, and therefore have reservations about science fiction, another possible answer to my question rests in the presence – or absence – of visible black characters in science fiction films and television programs and, in many cases, literature. Several of my interview subjects have indicated that such media offerings, for example the original *Star Trek* series, were their first exposure to the genre, and thus led them to seek out similar literature. The increase in these visible characters since the mid 1960's is crucial in providing even a partial answer to this question.

#### Fan Power, or Why the Question is Important

One may wonder why this question matters in the context of American culture. The main reason is that the science fiction convention is important to the production of the short stories, books, television shows and films that the fans attending the conventions consume. As a case in point, attendees of the World Science Fiction Convention vote on which works of science fiction are awarded the Hugo, science fiction's answer to the Oscar, or perhaps more accurately the

People's Choice Award. But more importantly, authors, editors, publishers and producers of science fiction works attend the WorldCon as well as most of the smaller regional and local conventions that occur throughout the year.

“The growth of conventions provided fandom with its first regular opportunity to socialize with professional editors, writers and artists in bulk,” wrote Harry Warner, Jr. “Moreover, the Worldcon spawned the aspect of fandom that has received the widest attention down through the years, the Hugo awards”(Sanders 66). The Hugo winners are such important news that I was getting emails about the winners from groups I belong to after the Hugo awards ceremony at the 2011 WorldCon, Renovation in Reno, Nevada, within seconds of the end of the ceremony. Years earlier, I had worked as a volunteer in the Press Relations department for ConStellation, the 1983 WorldCon in Baltimore, Maryland, and was responsible for calling Reuters with the winners for that year. In that pre-internet world, that represented the fastest way we could get the word out, and the editor who took my phone call stayed on the phone with me and took dictation, typing the story into a computer as I read the material to him. It was out on the Reuters wire service within minutes.

“Over the course of years these awards have become generally accepted as the highest awards in the field,” wrote Lester Del Rey. “For a novel to be a Hugo winner now often results in a considerable boost in sales, and many far outside the world of science fiction are aware of the importance of a Hugo” (Del Rey 211). A crucial thing to remember here is that since the science fiction field, and fandom in particular, had been so white-dominated for so long, writers and editors were probably unaware that science fiction was being read by and enjoyed by black fans as well as white fans.

“Whites control the publishing industry and are the majority population. Like everyone else, they love the idea that the world revolves around them, and support those image systems that reinforce that,” said black science fiction author Steve Barnes in an email interview. “Even if fans were 12% black, there is still this human tendency to cleave to what looks like you in the mirror. For all its posturing, 99% of SF is white people and their imaginary friends, and this isn't likely to change until most of those born before the civil rights movement are dead. Sorry to put it that way, but there is a limit to human perceptual flexibility.”

What Barnes means by “posturing” may refer to those very tropes I saw in media offerings such as *Star Trek* and the way I and perhaps others extrapolated from those images a false image of both the production side and the consumption side of the science fiction world. Or perhaps by way of these same images and tropes the production machinery of the genre can claim racial egalitarianism that only white fans see as real.

Barnes’ statement about the publishing industry’s power structure applies to the film and television industries as well. One need only look at the types of products (and the demographics of those who would purchase them) that are touted during different genres of television offerings to know that there is an ingrained pattern of stereotyping in these industries. These stereotypes may influence what a young person in particular will determine is appropriate for viewing or reading. The subtle pressure from such stereotypical portrayals in literature, media or advertizing could give the impression that black youth should not be interested in science fiction, or any other type of entertainment for that matter, that does not line up with the stereotype. As if some interests are not appropriate for people of a particular race, gender or any other area of difference.

#### A Few Words on Structure

In exploring this question I will first take a brief look at the history of science fiction conventions and how these conventions are structured. In Chapter I of this thesis, about convention history, I will be drawing upon my own knowledge gained over the past 30 years, as well as on information from a variety of scholars and writers that have come before, such as Lester Del Rey, Harry Warner, Jr. and Henry Jenkins. While my experience does not necessarily make me an expert in the world of science fiction conventions, it gives me much greater insight into this culture than a casual attendee or observer would have. Through this analysis I will look at the changing gender ratio of convention attendees from the early years up to now as an indicator of the possibility of an equivalent change in the racial demographics of convention-goers. In Chapter II I will look at some of the possible road blocks to black attendance at conventions, such as portrayals of blacks in early science fiction. In Chapter III, I will look at the idea of role models and representation in science fiction literature, film and television, particularly the positive portrayals, as a factor in drawing the interest of blacks to this genre. Finally in Chapter IV, I will look at the experiences of my informants regarding their experiences at conventions, particularly their interactions with white fans, as well as what science fiction books, films and television programs drew them to participate in fan culture and to attend conventions. Here I will also include some observations from Juanita Coulson, my only white informant. She has been active in the science fiction fan community since the early 1950s, as well as being involved in furthering civil rights on campus at Ball State University, and related the stories of a few black fans she knew from those days, and how they often received better treatment from their fellow science fiction fans than they did from the wider society. Her narrative speaks more to Jim Crow attitudes regarding public accommodations than to attitudes held by science fiction fans, but is still important in the history of the science fiction community and race relations.

### Theory, or Standing on Giants' Shoulders

As partly indicated above, my theoretical basis for this line of research rests at least in part in critical race theory and the ideas of essentialism and the social construction of race, and how these ideas come into play in the entertainment choices individual people make. As the social phenomenon of the science fiction convention stems entirely from just such individual choices, the idea that such choices could be steered by attitudes about the essential tastes in popular culture of any race is central to my line of thought. I may not frequently point to the works of particular thinkers in these theoretical areas during this work, but the general idea behind this project – that an essentialised concept of taste in regard to whether African-Americans can appropriately enjoy science fiction and participate in fan culture – stems from the works of many scholars in this field. Particularly useful authors and works regarding the overarching subject of race were Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?* and Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. These texts provide a firm grasp of the theories of essentialism and social construction, and how these concepts have contributed to the very stereotypes feeding into the consumption of popular culture that is central to my research project.

A concept that I have encountered several times in my survey of scholarly material about race and science fiction is Afrofuturism, which started as an online community founded by Alondra Nelson in 1998 as a place for “African-American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come” (Nelson, 9). While this philosophical framework includes science fiction, and even engagement with science fiction by fans of the genre, since my focus for this thesis is on the science fiction convention, an in-depth discussion of Afrofuturism would detract from the main purpose of this work.

In trying to explain to a friend outside the academy where my research is situated among the disciplines that I have drawn upon, I envisioned a triangle formed by cultural anthropology as one point, science fiction as literature and popular culture as a second point, and critical race theory as the third point. My research does not fall within any of these three disciplines, but partakes of all three. My preliminary research showed scholarship within each of these disciplines that painted a part of the picture, or at best hinted at the interconnections of these three areas. No other research I could find filled in the center of this triangle, which I hope I have at least partially accomplished.

#### On Being Both an Insider and an Outsider

Structurally, I have approached this research project from two angles. First, I looked for what others had written on the subject of race and science fiction and found quite a lot that dealt with race within science fiction as literature and film, such as *Race in American Science Fiction* by Isiah Lavender III, or the production and consumption of science fiction as a popular culture commodity, such as *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* by John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins. But I found very little about going from this level of participation to that of an engagement in fan culture that results in attending conventions. From the literature I read, I determined that I would need to conduct fieldwork in order to investigate the experiences of African-Americans who have participated in conventions to see what drew them to this level of fan activity. Personally, I had two problems to overcome in doing this type of ethnographic field work. First of all, I am white, which made me an outsider to the group I set out to study. Despite this outsider vantage point, I feared that my race might be a barrier to getting the candid responses I needed in order to make this research project what I envisioned it to be. Second, as mentioned before, I have been active in the science fiction fan community for many years. The downside of

this from a research perspective is that it makes me an insider in the community, and I could potentially take for granted information that an outsider would need more detailed explanations of. In his work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Cultures*, Henry Jenkins discusses this very problem with the counter-argument questioning the utility of ethnography from a disinterested outsider position, the “. . . recognition that there is no privileged position from which to survey a culture. Rather, each vantage point brings with it both advantages and limitations, facilitating some types of understanding while blinding us to others” (Jenkins 4). I feel that the potential problem of being an insider to fandom is offset by my access to a wide pool of potential informants and interview subjects that an outsider would not have. My position of an outsider to the black population also seems to balance my insider position in fandom because I do not have the same level of understanding of what it is like to be black in a largely white fan community as I do of being a white fan in that same community.

#### Scholarship on Science Fiction Fan Culture

Regarding the scholarly literature and other texts, including media, that I have looked at for this project, many are works about science fiction fandom and fan culture in general, such as David Hartwell's *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Fandom*, edited by Joe Sanders. Camille Bacon-Smith's *Science Fiction Cultures* does not deal directly with African-American participation in science fiction fan culture, but does look at some of the surrounding areas of gender, sexuality and other emerging fan constituencies. Of particular interest is how this book frames in academic terms the “space” of science fiction fandom, the convention. Another useful text, David Anderegg's *Nerds: Who They are and Why We Need More of Them*, comes from a psychological perspective and deals with the connection between science fiction fan activity and the nerd stereotype. Others refer to specific concerns of African-Americans

and science fiction as text, such as the *Dark Matter* books edited by Sheree R. Thomas. The fiction in this collection, though compelling, is less important than the five essays at the end of the first volume. Samuel R. Delany's "Racism and Science Fiction" and Charles R. Saunders' "Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction" are two of the best pieces I have read so far on the subject. I also will look at portrayals of black characters in science fiction literature written by both black and white authors, as well as similar instances in film and television.

### My Interview Subjects and Conducting the Interviews

As stated above, I conducted field research by interviewing black science fiction writer Steven Barnes as well as a small group of black science fiction fans, all but one of whom attend science fiction conventions regularly. Some of these informants had been acquaintances prior to this research project, others I recruited at conventions such as MarCon. Despite the sample size being fewer than a dozen people, I did get an almost even split between male and female respondents.

I failed to get a wide range in ages, however, but that could be explained by the general age makeup of people with the means needed to attend conventions. Not counting the membership fees conventions charge, if a fan wishes to attend a convention outside his or her home town, travel and hotel expenses can become an issue. This could explain why some younger, less financially established African-American fans were not as readily available for me to approach for an interview at conventions.

I conducted some of my interviews at MarCon 46, May 27-29, 2011 in Columbus, Ohio. Several of my informants were not able to attend this convention, but I was still able to conduct their interviews via email. Questions in these interviews revolved around their experiences at conventions, how they became interested in science fiction, reactions from their black family

members and peers to their interest in the genre, and what factors they might know of or suspect that could prevent black participation in convention fandom.

### What to Expect and What I Hope to Accomplish

As stated above, I have arranged this work with Chapter I as a historical overview of science fiction conventions. Chapter II will investigate four main barriers or reasons African-Americans might not become interested in science fiction or participate in fan culture at the convention level. Chapter III will look at examples of positive portrayals of black characters in the genre that would draw black readers and viewers to become fans. Chapter IV contains the bulk of my informants' reports of their experiences at conventions and their speculations on the research question; why other black people who enjoy reading science fiction literature or watching science fiction movies or television programs would not attend science fiction conventions.

My greatest hope is that this research will be the beginning of further inquiry into the areas of race and fan culture, and not just in the realms of science fiction. Issues of what sorts of popular culture are associated with or considered appropriate for any racial group can be seen as a barrier to the egalitarian, color-blind society that such trail-blazing science fiction icons as Gene Roddenberry, creator of the television series *Star Trek* envisioned. We take the way Roddenberry cast *Star Trek* for granted, but as Jenkins points out, quoting a passage from *The Making of Star Trek*, "A number of people [network executives] expressed concerns that the viewer might reject the concept of different races, particularly Negro and white, working side by side . . ." (Tulloch and Jenkins 6). The grip that this assumption had at the time has eased a great deal, but still lingers. Perhaps this thesis will help open a dialog in which the competing assumptions -- that on the one hand white fans can't relate to black characters and on the other that a few token black characters will suffice to show how egalitarian the production side of science fiction is -- can be

fully explored. In order to get there, we first must go back to the beginnings of science fiction fan culture to begin figuring out why so few black readers and viewers participate.

CHAPTER I  
A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE  
IN FAN CULTURE

The science fiction convention is the essential physical “space” of the subculture of science fiction fans, called fandom. From the earliest days of fan conventions, this was the place where fans from different parts of the country could meet in person and form the social bonds that sustain community. Also it has been a place to meet authors, editors, filmmakers and others in the business of producing the texts that inspire the fan behavior. In other words, it is a place to see and be seen, a two-way communications medium. Fans get to talk directly to the authors and producers of their favorite works, and the authors and others at the business end of the genre get to see who is consuming their product. The race and gender of fans that the authors and others see at conventions, and the nature of the comments they give, has an influence on what gets produced and what does not.

How Conventions Got Started

Many science fiction fans and scholars have written about the origin and early days of science fiction conventions. The works by David G. Hartwell and Joe Saunders mentioned in the introduction are worth note, as is Harry Warner, Jr.’s *All Our Yesterdays: an Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the 1940’s*. Conventions started shortly after Hugo Gernsback began publishing *Amazing Stories*, the pulp magazine in which he coined the term “scientifiction,” which later morphed into the term “science fiction” that we see today. Fans made contact with one another through the letters columns in this publication, and from these personal contacts sprang clubs, and eventually conventions (Hartwell 158-9). The first convention, by most accounts, was in 1936, when “a New York science fiction club decided to visit the science fiction club in Philadelphia, and

those fans have since called their meeting in Philadelphia the first WorldCon” (Bacon-Smith 12). Another early convention held in New York City drew approximately 200 attendees. An article in the July 10, 1939 issue of *Time* magazine described these fans as “mostly boys of 16 to 20” ([www.time.com](http://www.time.com)).

Even then, science fiction fans were subject to stereotyping. In describing some of the activities that had started the convention phenomenon, the unnamed reporter wrote:

Many keep every issue [of the science fiction pulp magazines of the time], and a copy of the magazine's first issue often fetches \$25 from collectors. Publishers soon discovered another odd fact about their readers: They are exceptionally articulate. Most of these magazines have letters columns, in which readers appraise stories. Sample: “Gosh! Wow! Boyoh-boy!, and so forth and so on. Yesiree, yesiree, it's the greatest in the land and the best that's on the stand, and I do mean THRILLING WONDER STORIES, and especially that great, magnificent, glorious, most thrilling June issue of the mosta and the besta of science fiction magazines. . . .”

(<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,761661-1,00.html>)

This reporter’s use of “exceptionally articulate” can only be taken as blatant sarcasm, considering the choices he made in how to quote the anonymous fans’ responses in the letters columns of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and this tone in reference to science fiction fans and their activities has been common ever since. In particular, the “gosh, wow” tenor of the quote is used to imply a non-critical assessment of the literature in question. However, fans over the years have for the most part embraced the labels given them by mainstream society, and replied in kind by calling those outside the science fiction fan community “mundane.” Despite this less than complimentary view of fans, conventions increased in number and attendance.

## Types of Conventions

The oldest continually running science fiction fan convention is the World Science Fiction Convention, or WorldCon, held annually in late summer. This convention has no fixed site, and the competitive bidding process is administered by the World Science Fiction Society. The most recent was in Reno, Nevada (2011). Information on the selection process and a history of the WorldCon, and the Hugo Awards that are presented there, can be found at the WSFS website: <http://worldcon.org/>. The WorldCon is important not only because of its place as the first of this type of convention, but because this is where the highest awards in science fiction, the Hugo Awards, are presented. These awards, given in many categories for science fiction literature such as novel, novella, novelette and short story as well as media offerings such as films and television programs, are presented to those works that have won a popular vote by the attending and supporting members of that year's WorldCon. As mentioned earlier, this award demonstrates the power that the organized fan community has within the machinery of cultural production in the science fiction world, and is the main reason that access to this fan community is so important.

Next in importance are some of the longer running regional conventions, such as BaltiCon in Baltimore, WindyCon in Chicago, and LACon in Los Angeles. Some regional conventions, such as DeepSouthCon, move from city to city in a way similar to WorldCon. Other than these important conventions, there are smaller conventions in all regions of the United States and many cities abroad throughout the year. Also in the mix are some mainly smaller conventions labeled by fans as relaxacons, which generally have only a fan guest of honor and have little or no formal programming.

As the convention names listed above indicate, a method to naming has evolved over the years, involving the use of the syllable “con” – short for convention – somewhere in the name. The most common construction is with the –con at the end of the name, but some conventions, such as ConFusion in Detroit put it first, and InConJunction in Indianapolis uses a word that contains the appropriate syllable in the middle. Another common though less frequent naming scheme for conventions is the use of –clave as part of the name. A convention that actually uses both is ConClave in Detroit. Another example is UpperSouthClave, a small convention in Kentucky.

The reason these varieties of science fiction conventions are important is that these smaller conventions are generally more accessible to many fans than the WorldCon. These smaller conventions also serve as entry points for fans new to the community. For example, most large cities in the United States as well as many in other countries have an annual science fiction convention, several of which were started in the 1950s or 1960s. These long-standing conventions also serve as a means for those attempting to bring a future WorldCon to their city to advertize their bid. Many WorldCon bid committees organize room parties at many of the larger regional conventions as well as several smaller conventions in order to publicize their bid. These room parties frequently provide free food and drink in a convivial atmosphere, and generally occur on Friday and Saturday evening. For a fan new to the community who may have heard of the Hugo awards, but not how they and the WorldCon locations are decided, it is a very empowering concept. The idea that they as fans get to vote on these awards, so long as they either attend or pay for a less expensive supporting membership to the WorldCon encourages deeper involvement in the community as a route to this sliver of power. A casual consumer of the literature or media offerings within the science fiction genre may not be aware of the process by which the Hugos are awarded because that they are not part of the convention-going community of fans. Thus, simply

attending a few conventions can provide a doorway into the power structure of a fan community that has the power to exert pressure on the business practices of the producers of the cultural commodity they themselves consume.

### Basic Convention Structure

Most of these conventions are run by groups of volunteers organized into a convention committee, with each committee member responsible for one or more departments or tasks involved in running the convention. Typically, science fiction conventions are held over a weekend at a hotel or convention center. Most run from Friday through Sunday. Attendees buy a membership, and the money collected from these memberships is used for all the financial needs associated with the convention. In most cases this involves covering the expenses of the guest or guests of honor, at least one science fiction author and customarily an artist who does covers for the books or magazines. Larger conventions have larger slates of guests. Expenses for these guests generally include travel expenses, a room at the hotel, and meals. Other types of guests, such as actors in science fiction films or television programs, may require additional payment for their time in attending a convention. A hospitality suite, usually called the ConSuite, is provided for attendees' convenience, and provides anything from minimal light snacks and soft drinks to more elaborate fare and alcoholic beverages, depending on the region of the country and the customs of that convention. Most conventions also have a dealers' room, where vendors sell books and other materials of interest to fans, and there is usually a per table fee for vendors. Many conventions also have an art show and auction, with hanging fees and a percentage of sales going to the convention. A costume contest or masquerade is also a common feature of the conventions, as are panel discussions, author readings and autograph sessions. Most convention committees negotiate favorable contracts with the convention hotel to get free or reduced-price function space in return

for guaranteeing that a minimum number of hotel rooms will be taken by convention attendees. Many of these functions and programs are not very different from those seen in any special interest convention, but these are some of the many things that set science fiction conventions apart from academic conferences or business and trade conventions.

#### A View to a Con, or Personal Observations from Conventions

I did not come into convention fandom cold, but through associations with several science fiction clubs, namely the Western Kentucky University Speculative Fiction Society, the Nashville Science Fiction Club, and the Falls of Ohio Science Fiction Club in Louisville, Kentucky. This gave me more of an idea of what to expect when I attended my first convention. For a lot of people, this is a fairly typical way of coming into organized fandom. Others, including some of my interview subjects, came to their first convention after seeing some form of advertizing for it, such as a convention listing in the back of one of the pulp science fiction magazines, or hearing about a convention from a friend who invites them to come along. Over the years since then I have been able to observe a lot of convention activity that underscores the fun, the community, and the unique character of fandom.

One of my most vivid early convention memories was one Saturday morning at breakfast. I had gotten up relatively early and headed down to the hotel restaurant to find Dan Caldwell, a friend from the Nashville club, alone at a large table. He had arrived just before I did, and was still looking at the menu, and I asked if I could join him. After getting coffee, I decided on the eggs benedict, but Dan hadn't decided yet on food. When my breakfast arrived, the two eggs were garnished with a slice of black olive each, centered on the yolks. Dan laughed and promptly ordered the "boobs benedict." By the time his meal arrived, several other fans we knew had arrived and joined us. Many of the others made the same meal choice that we had, and we kept the

waitress busy with coffee orders and multiple checks. As soon as one or two of us would leave the table, others would come in and join us. We kept that one large table in constant use until nearly noon, and while I was there, Dan and several of my other friends introduced me to several other fans from throughout the region that I hadn't met yet. Similar episodes of the permanent floating breakfast club occurred at other conventions I attended during the early 80's, but this was the most memorable.

Room parties late on Friday and Saturday nights at conventions are a fannish staple, and these parties are more often than not used to advertise other conventions or worldcon bids. In my early life in fandom, many of us would circulate to visit as many of these parties as we could, even when we were throwing our own party. This was one of the best ways to meet authors informally, and I remember the late Jack L. Chalker, one of the science fiction authors who attended many conventions in the region, holding forth in whichever room party he found that was serving coffee, as he did not drink alcohol. My friends caught on to this quickly, and whenever we even suspected Jack would be at a convention we made sure someone brought a coffee-maker. Jack could talk for hours on a wide range of subjects, from military history to politics to rock and roll music, and it was fun to just sit and listen even if I was not part of the conversations.

Music, both filk<sup>1</sup> and popular music, has been part of fan culture from the beginning. Many of the conventions I attended in the early 80's featured a dance on Saturday night after the Masquerade competition. Most of these involved recorded music rather than a live band, and the song "Time Warp" from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was a favorite. We would, of course, do the moves as shown in the film. Another musical feature I saw at ChattaCon in 2008 involved

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<sup>1</sup> Filk refers to a musical style or genre with lyrical content referencing science fiction, fantasy or horror texts or other material of interest to fandom, and can be either based on familiar popular or traditional songs or be original material. The term is reported to be from a typographical error in a fanzine or convention program that the fan community adopted as a fitting description of the art form.

science as well in the form of singing tesla coils. These large electric devices – a pair that were each at least six feet tall with a stand between holding two curved metal rods above them to conduct the electrical discharges – were tuned to give off what can only be described as small bolts of lightning to the musical melodies they were producing. For the past several years, ChattaCon has been at a hotel complex that has access to the arena previously owned by a now defunct minor league hockey team, and this is used for the con suite. Filk concerts and other entertainment such as these singing tesla coils are also given space there.

For the past five years or so I have been attending conventions with my friend Jeff Tolliver<sup>2</sup>. He tends to spend a lot of time at conventions in the consuite working on chain mail, usually with a teddy bear in a full suit of chain mail armor sitting on the table. He generally attracts people interested in what he's doing, and he will strike up a conversation with anyone about anything, and I've seen him participate in two or three conversations at once. I have seen him comment to a lady doing knitting about how it relates to his chain mail, discussing the history of armor and its uses in popular culture, then talk about chocolate making or growing chili peppers and the varieties he likes. Another of our friends, Julie Ashley, can sometimes be seen doing Reiki work, a Japanese form of hands-on energy healing, in another corner of the room. Fans are interested in a wide range of subjects beyond science fiction and fantasy literature and film. Many are able to pick apart the scientific flaws of their favorite novels, movies or television programs yet still enjoy the works.

This is just a small sample of the sorts of things that go on at conventions, and I could go on for pages with other anecdotes about things I have witnessed, and for even longer retelling incidents from conventions that have attained the stature of folk-tales within the community in a fashion similar to the way that filk music has become the folk music of the community of science

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff is now my husband.

fiction conventions. These specific individual practices, while not in and of themselves unique to the fan community, serve to establish the core of the subculture's virtual territory and delineate the boundaries between the world of fandom and the mundane world.

### The Role of Conventions in the Fan Community

Science fiction conventions serve three main functions in support of the fan community, or fandom as it is more popularly known. Foremost is that of delineating the community or subculture of fandom. Another important aspect is the space a convention provides for interaction between the fans and the authors and other producers of the texts – in whatever medium – that the fans are fans of. Also of high importance is the platform the convention provides for various fan-generated art forms, from visual arts to amateur costuming to filk music.

According to Henry Jenkins, “Fandom functions as an alternative social community,” and he comments on “its status as a utopian community” (Jenkins 280). In his work on filk music, Jenkins notes that fans view fandom as “an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society,” and comments on song lyrics that compare “the intimacy and communalism of fandom to the alienation and superficiality of mundane life” (280). Taking his cue from a comment made about fandom, Jenkins analyzes fannish reactions to the aspersions cast on their particular way of community building:

“Get a life,” William Shatner told *Star Trek* fans. “I already have a life,” the fans responded, a life which was understood both in terms of its normality by the standards of middle-class culture and by its difference from that culture. . . . If fans are represented as antisocial, simple-minded, and obsessive, I wanted to show the complexity and diversity of fandom as a subcultural community (277).

My personal experience with fan culture leads me to agree with Jenkins, but I can also see where both my personal experience and Jenkins' own position as an insider with respect to fan culture could be seen as suspect within the academy. However, perhaps an outsider to the fannish community would not see how similar science fiction fans within their own community are to any other group that cares about and participates passionately in any community based around a shared interest. Where an outsider sees antisocial behavior as typical of science fiction fans, when seen from within the community the fan sees his or her social contact with others within the community as fully equivalent to the social interactions valued by those whose close friendships are provided by work relationships or from within a physical neighborhood. In her work *Who Are You People? A Personal Journey into the Heart of Fanatical Passion in America*, Shari Caudron, a columnist and essayist, takes a journalistic tack in her look at a wide range of fan groups, asking: "Were passions connected to formative experiences? Culture? Class? Education? Were these people like me or different somehow?" (Caudron 16). Her non-academic investigation of several fan groups, including Barbie Doll collectors, ice fishing enthusiasts, fans of *The Andy Griffith Show*, as well as science fiction fans, started from her own experience of having no similar consuming passion in her own life. While she does not come to any specific conclusions about the nature of fan communities in general, her descriptions of the many diverse communities in her investigation show many commonalities.

Along with Jenkins' assessment of fan culture, Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* or "a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals" (Turner 131) can be applied to fandom, especially in light of the concept of liminality. A good example of this is the line between the everyday world and that of the convention. The repeated passage between these two states can be seen as a repeated rite of passage, or as Turner would say, fans could be "released

from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*” (129). Structure here is ordinary life, or what fans call the mundane world.

One example of how this works in the world of science fiction conventions is the way fans dress at conventions. As I have witnessed, and have done myself, many have particular clothing that they only wear at conventions. Even discounting full-blown costume work, which a sizable minority of fans wear nearly the entire weekend at a convention, other common clothing choices mark fans even more than the membership badges required at most conventions. As Caudron described her experience as an outsider to a science fiction convention:

. . . I was smacked with that familiar, scratchy, outsider feeling. I wasn't sure who I'd expected to find at a sci-fi/fantasy convention, but it wasn't aging hippies with wiry Einstein hair and tie-dyed T-shirts, or earth mothers in commodious peasant skirts, or young girls with spiky pink hair, or pale twenty-somethings wearing leather pants and studded dog collars. . . . At first, everyone in the lobby looked strange to me. But the more I watched, the more aware I became that *I* was the one that stood out in my black Capri pants, neatly sprayed hair, and toenails painted with a color called God Save the Queen's Nails. It was as if everyone else had been invited to a masquerade, and I'd shown up eager to buy Tupperware (Caudron 161).

This observation, though not the tone she uses, echoes my own experience. Even at conventions I have attended for the first time in a strange city, without knowing many of the other fans who would be attending, I could usually recognize other fans by their clothing choices. Many fans have a large collection of T-shirts from other conventions, or with designs or slogans from science fiction literature, film or television, or other themes affiliated with fan culture, and only wear such shirts at conventions. These types of clothing specific to the culture, along with a

membership badge for the convention, mark the fan as a member of the community residing in the “space” of the convention for the time the convention runs, and these markers are taken on at the beginning of the convention and removed at the end. Thus, the event and space of the convention fit with Turner’s model of the move from structure (the mundane space of “real life”) to *communitas* (the fan community enclosed in the place and time of the convention) and the return to structure at the end of the convention. Not only do these choices in clothing and other fashion statements mark a person as part of the fan community, but specific clothing items or other markers point to the fannish sub-genre the person is affiliated with. For example, the dog-collar could denote an affiliation with the Goth subculture that enjoys vampires and the horror genre. The peasant skirts could point to either filk music or fantasy. Tee shirts with motifs from Dungeons and Dragons or similar material such as dice point to the gaming subculture. These categories are not by any means rigid, as many fans are interested in more than one subgenre or subculture within fandom. For example, Jeff Tolliver, the chain-mail maker mentioned earlier has also done a fair amount of fan art such as covers for fanzines, and is very interested in science.

#### The Influence of Fan Conventions on the Business of Science Fiction

As previously stated, conventions often have professional science fiction authors as guests of honor, and this is one of the reasons fans attend conventions. Jenkins notes that from its inception:

[S]cience fiction fandom has maintained close ties to the professional science fiction writing community and has provided intelligent user criticism of published narratives. Fan conventions play a central role in the distribution of knowledge about new releases and in the promotion of comic books, science fiction novels, and new media productions. They

offer a space where writers and producers may speak directly with readers and develop a firmer sense of audience expectations (Jenkins 46-47).

This synergy between fans and producers of science fiction is key to why I feel it is important for representatives of all fan demographic groups to be visibly present at science fiction conventions in order for all to be able to give their input to the writers, editors and producers. If African-American fans are part of this space in which they can give feedback to people at the business end of science fiction, they have the power to influence the decision making process leading to which books get published and which films and television programs get produced – and what they look like when they are produced. This type of individual contact and the scope it offers for the give and take of a conversation can be much more valuable in getting both praise and critiques of works into the hands of those that make the decisions in this field than even the best letter-writing campaign could.

The breakdown of attendees versus authors at MarCon 44 in Columbus, Ohio in May of 2009, is a good illustration of just how many authors attend conventions. Out of a total attendance of approximately 1,500 at MarCon that year, more than 30 were authors or editors in at least the beginning stages of professional work in the field. This is in addition to the three authors that were either author or theme guests of honor. These non-honored authors ran the gamut from those that are very prolific and award winning to those who are more obscure. For example, Tim Waggoner, author of 18 novels and many short stories, was in attendance that year, as was D. Harlan Wilson, who despite having written five science fiction novels is better known as a scholar and the reviews editor of *Extrapolation*, a scholarly journal dealing with science fiction, fantasy and horror criticism. Most of these writers pay their own way to the convention for the exposure and contact with fans. Conventions allow these writers and editors to see the fans as something other than

faceless numbers on the other end of a balance sheet. This is one of the main reasons fandom needs to fully reflect the actual demographics of those who consume the works of science fiction. In the complex cause and effect of fandom and the machinery of cultural production, if there are few black fans visibly attending conventions, the authors, editors and media producers will not see the market for works featuring characters fitting that demographic. With few offerings with black characters to inspire a casual black fan to attend a convention to meet the author or producer or actor in such a work, few black fans will be attending the conventions at which they could be seen by the very producers that make the decisions as to what texts are produced.

#### Fan Art and Fan Writing as Training Ground

Of at least equal importance to these two functions of science fiction conventions is the site of fan-produced arts. Jenkins calls the convention “the center . . . of the fan art world” (253), and this is especially true of costuming, painting and drawing, and filk music. These forms are best experienced “live” at a convention for full effect, even though some fan art can be seen in fanzines, photographs and videos of costumes are posted online, and recordings of filk performances are widely available, mainly on compact disc. Fan writing, both fiction and nonfiction, provides an interesting contrast to this, as it does not depend as much on face-to-face interactions. However, conventions are important in this type of fan art as well, by providing fan writers the opportunity to meet one another and discuss their work. Jenkins sums up the importance of fan publishing as it relates to a route of entry into the professional ranks of science fiction as follows:

Fan publishing has represented an important training ground for professional writers and editors, a nurturing space in which to develop skills, styles, themes, and perhaps most importantly, self-confidence before entering the commercial marketplace. Marion Zimmer Bradley . . . has noted the especially importance [sic] of fandom in the development of

female science fiction writers at a time when professional science fiction was still male-dominated and male-oriented; fanzines, she suggests, were a supportive environment within which women writers could establish and polish their skills (47).

If this nurturing space and training ground provided women science fiction writers such valuable early experience, the same could hold true for black fans aspiring to write science fiction.

#### Pre-Sputnik Fandom and Carl J. Brandon, the Hoax Black Fan

The place of fan writing and publishing is even more central to the following episode of fan history, especially as to how little a name can reveal about a person, and how easily a false persona could be created – even in the pre-internet era. In an article on post World War II fandom, Harry Warner Jr. noted that early fandom was indeed dominated by white males, and the few females were mainly wives and sisters of the male fans. “Once in a long while, a black attended a con or a local fan club meeting, but none became fully active in fandom, with the possible exception of an isolated fan who identified himself as black when he quit fandom without ever having met another fan” (Sanders 69). While he is not entirely clear here, my guess is that Warner meant here that this lone black fan left fandom because he hadn’t met another black fan. In his own book, *All Our Yesterdays: an Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the Forties*, Warner notes:

A Negro had been one of the earliest fans in the New York area, another had occasionally attended the LASFS<sup>3</sup> meetings, and there had been some bitter controversy when a few U.S. fans demonstrated anti-Negro prejudices despite the apparent lack of fans to hate for the color of their skin. However, it is quite possible that one fan proved to himself through fandom that he could receive equal treatment even from the prejudiced, as long as he was not visible to them. A Portland, Maine, fan named Russell Harold Woodman produced four issues of a good fanzine named Triton, contributed well-liked manuscripts to other

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<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society

fanzines, and acting with Ed Cox threatened to revive Maine fandom at the end of the forties. Then he gafiated<sup>4</sup> suddenly and completely and wrote to me on May 24, 1949: “Perhaps a storm wave would sweep certain frontiers of the fan world if I had stayed in publishing long enough to reveal that I am a Negro. That fact would have surprised a lot of people, I think” (Warner 26-27).

His storm wave would hit later, and would have repercussions to this day.

Warner goes on to say that while female fans who were not related to or married to other fans became more numerous by 1957, there were still few if any black fans that were active to any extent. At this time “a Bay Area fan, Carl Brandon, had become increasingly prominent in fanzines in the United States as the first active black fan. He was the creation of Terry Carr and several other Bay area fans” (Saunders 70). Although Warner does not give a specific reason that this character was created, he outlines two very different schools of thought within fandom, one which “refused to take themselves or others seriously” and were “content to consider science fiction to be entertaining reading matter . . . and to consider fandom as a relaxing hobby” (68). The other faction in fandom, which Warner estimated at some 90 percent of the community prior to 1957, were those who “wrote gravely on serious topics” and “thought fandom had some sort of dignity” and viewed fandom as “a sort of missionary force for the dogma of science fiction” (68). The implied tension between these two factions could explain several hoaxes in fandom, including Carl Brandon, which Warner describes as circulating in fandom during that time. Also, Warner reports that in a 1958 fan poll, “the non-existent Carl Brandon” was mentioned as a favorite fan (71).

Warner writes:

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<sup>4</sup> GAFIA is a fannish acronym for Getting Away From It All, or ceasing participation in fan activity either temporarily or permanently.

The hoax was revealed, however, in 1958 at Solacon, that year's Worldcon<sup>5</sup>.

Terry Carr revealed it when sitting next to Ted White, he signed Carl's name on a quote card being passed around and handed it to Ted. Carl Joshua Brandon was, without question, one of the most successful hoaxes ever perpetrated on the microcosm. He had been Official Arbiter of the Cult and was on his way to becoming Official Editor of FAPA<sup>6</sup> when the hoax was revealed. Brandon did not start out a Negro – but when a conservative FAPA member wondered just how “liberal” FAPA would be should a Negro apply for membership, Carl, who was on the waiting list, informed FAPA officials it wasn't a “what if” question. (It should be noted that FAPA welcomed Carl; no one, not even the conservative who'd posed the question was unpleasant to him.) (82-83)

Despite Carl Brandon being a hoax, the idea that he as a supposedly black fan would be welcomed by FAPA and the rest of fandom in the late 1950s indicates a movement away from the overt racism that Warner describes from a decade earlier. Despite these incidents and another related by Juanita Coulson that I will include in a later chapter, Russell Harold's storm wave made landfall, and fandom survived.

Response to the hoax did not end there. The Carl Brandon Society was formed at WisCon in 1999 as a response to an article by Samuel R. Delaney, “Racism and Science Fiction” that appeared in the New York Review of Science Fiction in August of 1998. This caused a request for convention programming dedicated to issues of race, and eventually led to the society's founding (<http://www.carlbrandon.org/index.html>).

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<sup>5</sup> Held in South Gate, California

<sup>6</sup> FAPA stands for Fantasy Amateur Press Association. An Amateur Press Association is a sort of collaborative fanzine in which several members send individual work to be collated together by an Official Editor for redistribution back to the members.

Nalo Hopkinson commented on the Carl Brandon society and how it got its name in an interview with Alondra Nelson. “He was the fictional creation of white writer Terry Carr, who was in part responding to someone’s racist comment that black people had no place in the science fiction community” (Nelson 104-6). Warner did not relate that racist comments had directly inspired Terry Carr to invent Carl Brandon, but he did mention racist commentary a decade earlier. It may be that Hopkinson has access to personal narratives that I have not yet seen that speak to how Carl Brandon came to be.

That this hoax could have happened-- especially in light of Hopkinson’s comment and the earlier incidents that Warner relates -- and could have such repercussions to this day, is telling. As recently as 1999 and even since then fans, authors and scholars in the field of science fiction have noticed the problem of representation in the ranks of fans and authors alike.

#### Conclusion

Although fandom is now much more balanced between males and females than it was during the 1930s, the community is not as inclusive of blacks – at least in numbers – as the white fans themselves seem to believe it is or should be. What is most important to note here is that conventions give fans access to the authors and other producers of science fiction texts, and if these producers do not see and hear all fans, including black fans, that are interested in the product, they will assume that the only consumers are the ones they encounter at conventions, the majority of whom are white. Also, considering the idea that fan publishing can be a training ground for future professional science fiction authors, and that conventions are a way to plug into this publishing community, attendance at conventions can be seen as essential to full participation in the professional community. In other words, if African-Americans are absent from the convention scene, authors and publishers will be less likely to consider the possibility that manuscripts with

strong black characters will be of interest, and potential black authors will not get the early training to enter the professional ranks. This leads to a classic chicken and egg question: how will black people get drawn into the genre without black writers and black characters, and where will new black writers come from without the writers and characters in the genre to be role models and hooks into the genre? Of course, there have been some notable exceptions to this argument with such authors as Samuel R. Delany, Octavia L. Butler and Nalo Hopkinson. The following chapters will look at what might be keeping African-American fans away from conventions, or away from science fiction in general, and some of the factors that have attracted African-American viewers and readers to the genre.

## CHAPTER II

### POSSIBLE BARRIERS TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN SCIENCE

#### FICTION FANDOM

Through my research, based on academic and other published sources as well as interviews with black science fiction fans and authors, I have identified four possible sources of barriers to participation in fandom in general, which has implications for convention attendance. The first potential barrier is the documented distrust of science in the African-American community and the way this could negatively impact a potential interest in science fiction. A second impediment to participation in fandom stems from cultural biases regarding the “nerd” stereotype harbored by both white and black Americans. The third possibility is the lack of black characters, or inclusion of black characters portrayed in a negative fashion, in science fiction of all media through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A final possibility is racial bias or overt racial discrimination in the science fiction publishing industry. Any one of these potential barriers could be in play, or any combination of them, in the individual experience of black readers or viewers that could in potential find fandom and experience the sense of community that it gives.

#### African-American Distrust of Science

Consider the callous disregard exhibited by the U.S. Public Health Service in the 40-year experiment on poor black men in the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments. These experiments involved the U.S. Public Health Service, and in the name of understanding the disease more fully, they deceived some 400 African-American men with late-stage syphilis regarding the treatment they were receiving, aspirin and an iron tonic rather than medications that would cure the disease (Reverby 1). In fact, there is evidence that the PHS tried to prevent the men from seeking more

successful treatment from other sources (2). It should come as no surprise that the repercussions of this study influence the African-American community to this day.

A study by a team of physicians from John's Hopkins published in 2008 showed that "black men and women were only 60 percent as likely as whites to participate in a mock study to test a pill for heart disease" (*Science Daily* 14 January 2008) The article links this behavior to the Tuskegee experiments and argues that this perpetuates the "legacy of blacks' mistrust of physicians and deep-seated fear of harm from medical research persists and is largely to blame for keeping much-needed African Americans from taking part in clinical trials." The study this research was based on was done in 2002, 30 years after the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was shut down. Even though the article does not explicitly say that the participants mentioned the infamous Tuskegee study, it implies a connection.

"Numerous articles, in both the professional and popular press, have pointed out that the study predisposed many African Americans to distrust medical and public health authorities, and has led to critically low Black participation in clinical trials and organ donation" (Gamble 431). And the distrust did not start with this study, but was a continuation of discriminatory practices dating from before the Civil War, through "the use of slaves and free Black people as subjects for dissection and medical experimentation" to the point that "Black people lacked the power to even protect the graves of their dead" (432).

But the underpinnings of a scientific rationalization of race and inequality have roots as far back as European contact with Africa and the New World, and this attitude persists to this day:

As we now understand, because of the great geographical and temporal separations of the peoples of Western Europe from those of the New World and West Africa, the illusion that humans came in qualitatively different subgroups was easy to sustain, given the evident

differences in physical appearance among inhabitants of the three regions. In the English colonies in particular, these differences in appearance were capitalized on to provide a biological rationale for innate differences among the groups. This in turn provided a justification for European economic exploitation of the other groups in convenient ways (rationalized as appropriate to their differing forms of inferiority), taking the labor of Africans by enslaving them and confiscating the land of Native Americans by limiting them to reservations (Fish 11-12).

Fish goes on to say that “Once the concept of race had become scientifically legitimate and politically institutionalized, it was used against former slaves and also provided a justification for laws against intermarriage” (12). It is easy to move from Fish’s depiction of early European assumptions that difference automatically implies inferiority to the idea of inherent differences in intelligence to more elaborate and recent scientific justifications such as *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, published in 1994 by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. In a chapter in Fish’s *Race and Intelligence: Separating Science and Myth*, John U. Ogbu calls the publication of this work “a reminder that beliefs in the inferiority of Blacks still exist even in White scientific minds. The belief that Blacks are intellectually inferior is used to rationalize their exclusion from desirable jobs and inclusion in the larger society” (Fish 254).

Ogbu and others have called into question Herrnstein and Murray’s interpretations of data from IQ testing. The consensus is that factors such as family income and quality of schools were not taken into account as possible reasons for the differences in test scores between white and black students. The idea that such research could be taken seriously less than 20 years ago, and that government officials could base decisions on such flawed research is another possible explanation for why blacks mistrust the scientific community.

Another issue echoing this ambivalence toward science is the African-American response to the American space program, as illustrated by the 1974 song by Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon” (Dean, [www.dailykos.com](http://www.dailykos.com)). The following lyrics, reprinted in the article, show by use of the racial slur ‘whitey’ that African-Americans saw the space program as both an endeavor only open to white people, and a use of government resources for things other than alleviating the poverty so many were experiencing:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.

(with Whitey on the moon)

Her face and arms began to swell.

(and Whitey's on the moon)

I can't pay no doctor bill.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.

(while Whitey's on the moon) (Dean [www.dailykos.com](http://www.dailykos.com)).

Here we see a bleak description of life of poverty as seen by the black community. Tropes of rats biting a child and no money for a doctor bill point to such poverty, which the lyrics of the song contrast sharply with the clean, futuristic and all-white images of the space program. The space suits are white, the fuselages of the rockets are white, and all the faces from astronauts to mission control to the media were white – and male. People in poverty, both black and white but mainly black, saw the money being spent on the space program and felt it should have been spent to help alleviate poverty. Blacks in particular saw the space program as one more proof that white America did not care about the problems the black community faced. Looking again at the song

lyrics, compared to the money spent on the space program, a simple round of antibiotics for a child bitten by a rat was miniscule.

African-American antipathy toward the space program did not end with the Apollo program. An African-American academic who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania reported the following from a visit to her in-laws during the time of the space shuttle *Challenger* accident:

I, like most Americans, had a special concern for the fate of one crew member – the appealing young white woman schoolteacher, Christa McAuliffe, who had won her chance to travel in space in a national competition for teachers. I said I was sorry about her death. My remark was met only by blank stares – in fact, all of the commentary about the accident was received with total disinterest by my in-laws, except for one bit of information. When the name and photo of the lone black crew member, Ronald McNair, were flashed on the screen, they leaned forward with a single coiled motion, galvanized into intense attention. This one was ours, their posture reminded and rebuked me; this one was our concern, this man alone deserved our mourning (Disch 176).

What is important to note in these illustrations of the attitudes of African-Americans to science is that science is viewed as not only a potential threat but as a path denied to all but whites, as well as a national priority at odds with their experience. The connection with science fiction, and through the genre to activity in science fiction fandom, may not seem obvious, but at least a passing interest in science is necessary for an appreciation of science fiction, especially with regard to “hard” science fiction. As folklorist Barry Childs-Helton is quoted, “a lot of [the texts] grew out of an industrial ideology of “progress” that the experience of most minorities belies” (Davidoff, 29 [footnote]). Thus, individuals who actively distrust science would probably not be interested in fiction that celebrates and valorizes science. Therefore we can see how these attitudes

could provide a barrier and explain at least in part the low number of African-Americans active in science fiction fandom.

### The “Nerd” Stereotype and Fan Activity

Derogatory terms for particular groups of people have been with the human race for most of our existence, but the focus of what is derided changes over the years. David Anderegg, a child and family psychologist, outlines how these stereotypes are inculcated in children:

. . . kids apply the terms “nerd” and “geek” to one another. They know it is a bad thing to be, and they know they don’t want to be one, even before they know what it is. They know from other kids’ intonation that it is a term of scorn, and therefore something to be avoided. It is, of course, a painful moment in the life of all kids when they hear the term applied to themselves and realize that it fits (Anderegg 8).

Sadly, children try to avoid these labels of nerd or geek even before they have any idea what they mean, but soon find out that doing well in school and being interested in intellectual activities or science fiction will earn them these labels. Besides looking at how the term comes into use among children, Anderegg connects this form of prejudice tenuously to that of race:

This is a prejudice unlike any other in American culture at present. Enlightened adults would not dream of instructing kids in any other negative stereotype and tell themselves it’s okay to do it because kids will outgrow it. We would not, for example, teach kids every false ugly thing that is said about African-Americans or Hispanics and then hope that when they grow up they will figure out that these things aren’t really true. We work hard to combat prejudice before it ever gets started, because we know how hard it is to eradicate once it gets started. . . .But when it comes to nerds and geeks, we pretend it’s all in good fun; we adults know that nerds and geeks are okay, and that in fact we can’t live without

them, so we think it's okay to make fun of them. We act like it's all in good fun to communicate to our kids that people who are smart and do well in school and *like science fiction* and computers are also people who smell bad and look ugly and are so repulsive that they are not allowed to have girlfriends. And then we wonder why it's so hard to motivate kids to do well in school (Anderegg 32-33, italics added).

The comparison between racial epithets and the nerd/geek label is important here. While most parents do not allow their children to use racial epithets, we still see them being used by adults in this country. Not so for the nerd or geek label. Unless a parent has been labeled a nerd or geek themselves, they rarely discourage this behavior the way they would similar behavior with regard to race. Adults who are not considered or self-identified as geeks or nerds encourage this early foray into anti-intellectualism. The mass media is also guilty of aiding and abetting this stereotyping. These negative labels and comments aimed at young nerds or geeks are as painful and destructive as racial or sexual slurs.

Fans since the earliest days of the culture onward have experienced the results of this type of prejudice. As Juanita Coulson put it: "I can testify from personal experience that a potential fan needed a thick skin in those days, to endure teasing and downright contempt. Perhaps that's why some youngsters, with the same interests and predispositions I had, decided to adapt to the mainstream – and never became fans" (Sanders 6).

As I showed in the quote earlier, Anderegg mentions an interest in science fiction as one of the earmarks of a nerd or geek, so it would not be surprising that young people who like science fiction might not want to admit it lest they earn such a derogatory label.

In the early days of fandom, there were many more males involved than females, and Coulson's comments regarding how women who were bucking the feminine stereotypes of the

time to come into fandom might shed some light on how both external and internal stereotypes might influence individual choices to participate in fandom.

It was rough for boys. It could be exquisitely painful for girls. Girls didn't even have the consolation of hoping to be pilots, astronomers, or scientists – those versions of SF's heroes – when they grew up; so far as any girl then knew, those professions were strictly male territory. That might explain why so few girls became fans in that era. America's standard of the 'right' enthusiasms for women ran counter to SF. One had to swim long and hard upstream before finding the refuge of fandom. . . . I was a former tomboy, thoroughly fed up with non-fan males' patronizing behavior towards women. Fannish males were a pleasant shock. I had all but given up hope that any man would accept me as an intellectual equal. But most male fans did. It was no longer necessary to 'play dumb' or hide my knowledge. That fact alone made fandom seem very progressive in the '50s (Sanders 6-7)

Coulson is speaking to the lack of role models in science fiction for women, but those role models were at least as scarce for blacks in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Through the mid-1960s there were few positive female or black characters in science fiction, and even later the negative portrayals of both women and blacks lingered, as I will show in Chapter III.

So have African-American fans' experiences been similar to or different from that of white fans in regards to the "nerd" stereotyping, and if it has been different, could that difference be enough to dissuade potential black fans from open participation in fandom? According to some of my informants, the stereotyping takes on not only a social connotation, but a cultural and political dimension as well.

Cheryl Martin is a 42-year-old fan who identifies as black and currently resides in Tucson, Arizona but who grew up in North Carolina. Her response to my final interview question, “Is there anything else about this subject that I have not addressed with my questions that you think is important?” is illuminating:

I've always felt like an outcast and when I found fandom, I found acceptance that I'd never received before. I grew up in the South at a time [sic] with the black community did not put education/intellectual pursuits as a priority or even as a desirable thing. I got ridiculed a lot for reading, for gaming, for just being smart (I got put in what was called Gifted & Talented program when I was 9 and I attended the NC School of Science & Math). So for me, being able to be around people who valued learning, reading and the like was validating and just the most wonderful thing ever (online interview 05/22/11).

Here, we not only have the anti-nerd sentiment at work with the negative attention Martin received from her family for reading and gaming, but also the distrust of science displayed by the lack of priority her family gave to education and intellectual pursuits similar to the sentiments discussed in the previous section.

Ron Poole, a black fan from Columbus, Ohio, echoes this sentiment in his response to a different interview question regarding why there are differences in black and white participation in fandom, and expands upon the theme:

I never even thought about talking science fiction to any black people or black family members that I knew while growing up. The culture was such in the 70s, 80s and even 90s that I would simply never reveal my interest to other blacks. I considered it unthinkable and as an invitation to be ridiculed. I thankfully believe it is different for the younger fans of the last decade or so, because of social changes and the inclusion of more blacks in

science fiction stories. But I would guess the stigma still lingers. As to why: It is because of an all-pervasive and oppressive “black identity” that I believe holds us prisoners as a culture. Black people are made to feel that if they have any interests that fall outside what is considered to be commonly acceptable, they are guilty of betraying the race. A white fan could be thought of as a “nerd,” of [sic] “geek” by others, but that is about all; a black fan could be called a “sell-out” or “Uncle Tom” or worse by family and friends -- especially since fandom includes participation with whites and other races. This self-imposed and inflexible identity has had many serious consequences for the black race over many years (email interview 05/19/11)

Thus, African-Americans who enjoy science fiction face more than just the anti-nerd rhetoric other fans confront. These two informants show us that within the African-American community there is a political and cultural ramification to expressing an interest in a form of popular culture so strongly associated with a dominant group responsible for so much oppression. The theme of science as either a menace or a path denied to blacks coupled with the accusation of race betrayal the black fan is confronted with are both well explained by my informants. While Poole indicates that racist labels such as “Uncle Tom” are painful, coupling such labels with the nerd/geek labels that are also considered derogatory by most doubles the pressure to accept the socially constructed roles we are expected to play. If this was not enough to give a black fan pause in regards to pursuing an interest in science fiction, some of the characterizations of black characters in early science fiction literature, and later in film and television, did nothing to help the situation.

Representation of African-Americans in Science Fiction Literature, Film and Television

Although in recent years, science fiction literature, film and television have provided more positive portrayals of African-American characters – I will discuss this further in Chapter III – the early years of science fiction were particularly problematic. For example, “[i]n the futures depicted in the earliest SF of the pulp magazines, blacks are as scarce as they would be on Baffin Island, except insofar as SF’s penchant for lustful aliens may derive from similar fantasies of interracial rape (e.g., Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*)” (Disch 198). In this chapter of Disch’s work, titled “The Third World and Other Alien Nations,” he discusses not just the idea that aliens in science fiction are a stand-in for blacks, but also for women and other non-white peoples here on Earth. One example of a negative portrayal of blacks in science fiction literature that Disch mentions in this chapter is Robert A. Heinlein’s *Farnham’s Freehold*, first published in 1964. The premise of this novel is that a small family and a couple of other people, including a black servant working for the family, respond to a nuclear war by entering the Farnham’s bomb shelter. Somehow the bomb blasts cast them into the far future, one in which blacks are the ruling class. The following is Heinlein’s description of his main character’s first contact with Ponce, Lord Protector of the Noonday Region:

Hugh felt an impression that this man (there was no slightest doubt that he was master)—that the commander had taken time to change into formal clothes. Hugh felt encouraged. They were prisoners—but if the leader took the trouble to dress up before interviewing them, then they were prisoners of importance and a parley might be fruitful. Or did that follow?

But he was encouraged by the man's face, too. He had an air of good-natured arrogance and his eyes were bright and merry. His forehead was high, his skull massive; he looked intelligent and alert. Hugh could not place his race. His skin was dark brown

and shiny. But his mouth was only slightly Negroid; his nose, though broad, was arched, and his black hair was wavy (Heinlein 107).

That Heinlein, through his character Farnham, makes a point of analyzing the level of “negroid” features in his captor speaks to his acceptance of a scientific basis for race, which has been genetically proven to not exist. Here, Hugh Farnham looks for supposed racial markers as a way to assess the potential reception he would get from this individual who now had power over him. It would seem that the “bright merriness of his eyes” that could have meant a sympathetic attitude was less a concern to Farnham than the race of his captor.

As the novel unfolds, Heinlein portrays a society in which whites are enslaved and blacks, who are also cannibals, rule. Patricia Turner looks at the rumors of cannibalism leveled by both blacks and whites against the other from the earliest contact through the slave trade and beyond as both a symptom of misunderstandings of culture and appearance and “Eating humans becomes the ultimate act of human aggression and sexual domination” (Turner Kindle location 342). The idea of cannibalism represents both the ultimate transgression of taboo and the ultimate form of physical domination, and its use in Heinlein’s novel can only be seen as an extremely fearful response to the times it was written in.

Considering the date this book first came out, at the height of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the reactionary xenophobia is inescapable. If this was typical of the science fiction being produced during this time, it should come as no surprise that African-Americans would see this work as insulting and demeaning and, as Heinlein was one of the best-known and prolific writers of that time, assume that the rest of the genre would be more of the same.

And it was more of the same, particularly in terms of the roots of science fiction. As Steven Barnes wrote:

So I looked to the stories of Conan the Barbarian, and Mike Hammer, and James Bond, and Leslie Charteris' *The Saint*. And there was something very interesting about all of these he-man worlds: no black people need apply.<sup>7</sup> It was positively grotesque. When Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote that "White men have imagination, Negroes have little, animals have none," he was doubtless merely expressing the attitudes of the time. That didn't make it any easier to read, and I would have put that Tarzan novel down if I hadn't so desperately needed the emotional vitamins within (Barnes 264).

The comments about the level of imagination, implying that for whites it is a God-given trait, show the pervasive and unconscious racism in the literary world of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also, such a comment, that black people had little imagination, must have had a particular sting for a budding author such as Barnes, considering how much imagination a successful science fiction writer needs as part of his stock in trade. Other potential black authors wanting to write in this genre, reading such racist rant, might have given up on their ambition and never become, as Barnes is, one of the best-known black science fiction authors today.

Barnes also had less than flattering comments about how blacks were portrayed in film and television during this time. He says that in the 60s, black characters began to appear in films in the science fiction and related genres, which implies that before then there weren't any such characters. "But you know what? They usually existed only to die horribly, and usually to protect white people. . . . It was to the point, as a kid, I would go see some SF flick with a black character and when I returned home the other kids in the neighborhood would ask: 'Well, how did they kill the Brother this time?'" (265).

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<sup>7</sup> Although many of the examples Barnes cites here are not science fiction, they do belong to either the adventure story, fantasy or mystery genres that were staples of the pulp era along with science fiction.

This exchange illustrates two things; first that the science fiction/adventure films of that time stuck close to certain conventions to the point of being formulaic, and second, that Barnes' peers saw this as a reason for solidarity and use of the term "Brother." From the comment, the only difference was how the token "Brother" was killed. This trend underscores the attitude that blacks were expected to be subordinate to whites and to serve them. The implicit racism of such a common theme in these movies was no doubt invisible to most white viewers, but Barnes and his peers noticed it as a reflection of the general attitude of white society.

It is interesting to note that Barnes' essay that I am quoting from is published at the end of a Star Trek novelization he wrote for the Deep Space Nine episode "Far Beyond the Stars," an episode in which Ben Sisko, the station commander played by Avery Brooks, experiences the life or memories of a black SF author in the 1950's. There is a scene early in the novel, told from the point of view of Sisko's alter ego in the story line. This alter-ego, Benny Russell, and his coworkers writing for a science fiction pulp magazine, are in a discussion with their boss, Douglas Pabst. One of the magazine's subscribers wanted to know what the writers looked like, and Pabst has a photographer lined up, but asks Benny and the only female writer on the staff, K. C. Hunter, to not come in for the photo session:

"It's not personal, Benny,' Pabst said quietly. 'But as far as our readers are concerned, Benny Russell is as white as they are.' . . . Herbert was the first to speak. Of course. 'Well, if the world's not ready for a woman writer – imagine what would happen if it learned about a Negro with a typewriter – run for the hills! It's the end of civilization!'" (53-54).

Women science fiction writers in the period depicted here often either used a male pseudonym or used initials as the character K. C. Hunter does in this story. Authors like Andre

Norton and C. L. Moore are good examples of this. But it is interesting to note here that, although Russell was male, the fact that he was black was considered more threatening to the status quo.

Considering the examples of the portrayals of blacks noted here, the science fiction publishing and media industry at best ignored blacks as viable characters and at worst portrayed them in very negative ways. But does the television episode and Barnes' novelization bear even a passing resemblance to the true attitudes of the science fiction publishing and media production industries? Unfortunately, according to several sources, it does.

#### Institutional Racism in the Science Fiction Industry

As the fictional Douglas Pabst said in the preceding section, racial bias in the publishing and media production industries is not necessarily personal but rather an example of institutional racism. The simplest generally accepted definition of institutional racism is that it is not a case of one individual discriminating against another based on race in a specific situation, but is still a pattern of social custom that results in racial discrimination:

Institutional racism views inequality as part of society's structure. Therefore individuals and groups discriminate whether they are bigoted or not. These individuals and groups operate within a social milieu that ensures racial dominance. The social milieu includes laws, customs, religious beliefs, and the stable arrangements and practices through which things get done in society (Eitzen et al 233).

Racial profiling by law enforcement can perhaps be seen as an example of institutional racism. Here is a good explanation of why and how such bias can exist. Eitzen later refers to a study of media depictions of minority characters conducted in 1998 that showed "Black men are portrayed disproportionately as drug users, criminals, lower class, and 'pathological'" (233). This is a statement about portrayals in media in general, but Barnes' statement above would indicate that

this trend, at least through the early 1960s, held true in science fiction. The business of publishing and producing science fiction has the same financial structure and pressures – as well as the same ingrained assumptions – as the rest of the entertainment and publishing industry, so science fiction, while pushing the sociopolitical envelope in some ways, cannot risk pushing too hard.

But what about the publishing industry as regards to black authors and black characters? Samuel R. Delany recounts an incident in 1967 that illustrates the fact that institutional racism did indeed, even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, occur in the science fiction publishing industry.

On February 10, a month and a half before the March [Nebula] awards, in its partially completed state, *Nova* had been purchased by Doubleday & Co. Well . . . three months *after* the banquet, in June, when it was done, with that first Nebula under my belt, I submitted *Nova* for serialization to the famous sf editor of *Analog* magazine, John W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell rejected it, with a note and phone call to my agent explaining that, while he liked pretty much everything else about it, he didn't feel his readership would be able to relate to a black main character. That was one of my first direct encounters, as a professional author, with the slippery and always commercialized form of liberal American prejudice: Campbell had nothing against my being black, you understand. (There reputedly exists a letter from him to horror writer Dean Koontz, from only a year or two later, in which Campbell argues in all seriousness that a technologically advanced black civilization is a social and a biological impossibility. . .) No, perish the thought! Surely there was not a prejudiced bone in his body! It's just that I had, by pure happenstance, chosen to write about someone whose mother was from Senegal (and whose father was from Norway), and it was the poor benighted readers, out there in

America's heartland, who, in 1967, would be too upset . . . (quoted in Thomas, *Dark Matter* 387-8).

Apparently Campbell figured that since the character's mother was from Senegal, the readership would assume he was black, rather than biracial since his father was from Norway. Also, Delaney calls this his first exposure to institutional racism in the industry, implying that he had other experiences. He lends weight to the argument by referencing the letter to Dean Koontz that followed a similar track. Note also that this rejection from Campbell came after Delaney had already sold the novel to Doubleday, whose editor obviously had no such qualms about readers' reactions to the main character. The reasoning he gives for this seemingly unorthodox idea of serializing the novel was that, at the time, novels had better sales if they had first been serialized in the pulps (388). The clout of the pulps has lessened over the years, but does this institutional racism still exist? Steven Barnes seems to agree: "Trust me, sit in a Hollywood pitch meeting, and watch the executive try to sandwich a white character into a black story, parroting the wisdom that 'audiences won't identify.' And what happens if they don't? Why the accepted, hard-learned wisdom is that they won't go into the theaters" (Barnes 265).

At least as recently as the early 1990's, this sort of institutional racism was still alive and well in the sf/fantasy/horror<sup>8</sup> publishing industry. In her introduction to a transcript of a panel discussion at the 1997 Black Speculative Fiction Writers Conference, Jewelle Gomez writes:

When I first circulated my novel *The Gilda Stories*, the New York publishing establishment shook with a weird mixture of laughter and distaste. The rejection in their letters to me was framed differently in each, but essentially I was told that my main character was unsellable because she was a woman of color, a lesbian, and a vampire. The sting I felt was as much a

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<sup>8</sup> Science fiction, fantasy and horror literature are often linked genres in the publishing industry.

personal wound as a dismissal of my novel because certainly two out of the three charges applied to me (quoted in Thomas, *Reading the Bones* 349).

Despite the upsurge in popularity of vampire stories in the early 2000s, which apparently these publishers failed to anticipate, Gomez's work was being rejected, and as a consequence, Gomez herself, as she identifies as sharing two of three characteristics with her main character. Since then, vampires drawn from every conceivable ethnic group have no doubt shown up somewhere in the genres of fantasy, horror or science fiction, and had these publishers who rejected Gomez' work back then chosen to publish instead of dismiss they might have started the trend.

Here, we have three black authors in the realm of speculative fiction, each with a story to tell about how their works involving black main characters were received by the publishing and production establishment. Does this mean that these editors and film and television executives are still stuck in the mind-set that science fiction fans are, as described in 1939, still adolescent white males, despite all the evidence to the contrary? If there are no black readers and viewers of science fiction, where did these writers whose work involving black main characters come from? Since all evidence I have seen thus far suggests that science fiction authors got into the business because they enjoyed the genre, the answer is plain. Somehow, despite the assumptions caused by the institutional racism of the publishing and media production industries, despite social pressures against enjoying – let alone writing – science fiction, and despite a completely understandable mistrust of science itself, some aspect of the genre drew these individual blacks in as consumers, and then as producers. I will discuss through an analysis of some popular works of science fiction literature and three television programs, just what it is about science fiction and its related genres that has drawn in this African-American component of the audience in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

These four possible barriers to participation in science fiction fan culture each have enough evidence, at least through personal anecdotes, to support my theory that they indeed could explain why so few blacks enter into active fandom and attend conventions. People not interested in science, or who see science as a threat or as an endeavor they are barred from, are not likely to turn to fiction or media that has science as a central trope. Essentialism and a social construction of what constitutes proper interests for an African-American, both those imposed by the dominant culture and those imposed from within black culture, could also play a role. The lack of strong and positive black characters, or black characters of any description, in much science fiction shows potential fans that there is nothing here for them. The institutional racism exhibited by editors and producers claiming strong and positive black main characters are “unsellable” is an obvious source of this lack of such characters for black readers to identify with. In spite of how these four barriers, individually or in concert, have acted to keep African-Americans away from science fiction and thus out of fan culture, a few individuals have persevered and gotten past these obstacles. For these, the question is what brought them into the culture, and what has kept them there. I will take up this question in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

## DRAWING IN BLACK READERS AND VIEWERS:

## EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE PORTRAYALS OF BLACK CHARACTERS IN SCIENCE

## FICTION LITERATURE AND MEDIA

Despite glaring examples of unflattering portrayals of black characters in science fiction such as Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* discussed earlier, there have been many positive portrayals, particularly since the mid-1960s. Perhaps the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath is the root cause of the timing of this change. Unlike writers of mainstream fiction who have the world in which their characters exist already here around them as reflected in our present or gleaned from depictions of our past, science fiction authors must design their own worlds. Whether this designed environment is here on a future Earth or on another planet, the authors also have to bring social structures that are influenced by those of the world in which they themselves exist into their fictional world. In the process of designing the world for their fictional characters, authors' reactions to their own society can shape that fictional world. These new portrayals of blacks in science fiction after the Civil Rights movement did have an impact on readers, as a contrast to the way Steven Barnes describes the earlier, less positive portrayals:

True, as Kay Bass rightly points out, there aren't enough female characters with spunk and grit, but girls aren't required to "prove" themselves in aggressive, violent competition in order to be considered "feminine." Little black boys and little white boys want pretty much the same things out of life, across the board, and most of what we do in life, we learn from watching role models.

Don't believe it? You learned to walk and talk and ride bicycles by watching others do it. Shouldn't black children be able to learn by watching white heroes, you say? Well,

obviously – yet the more levels of logical abstraction between you and the role model, the more difficult it is to empathize (Barnes, 264-5).

In this quote, Barnes is getting at the idea of role models and how images in literature can guide young people, especially teens or preteens, in more situations than those offered by their own lives. Also, as he indicates, these images are part of the social construction not only of race but of gender. The social and emotional message of Barnes' quote here is that men of all races are required to prove their masculinity in ways vastly different than women are expected to prove their femininity. However, more recently than the era of Burroughs and his contemporaries, science fiction has provided more women and minorities with these heroic qualities than were customary in the early days of the genre that Barnes references. The point here is that only recently have there been main characters other than white males. As Barnes indicates above, each difference between a character and the reader or viewer makes it more difficult for said reader or viewer to identify with said character. Even a protagonist that is like you down to hair and eye color is more personally interesting and engaging than someone of the same gender and race would be otherwise. As few people find their twins in literature, films or television programs, there will always be a few areas of divergence, but the fewer levels of abstraction between the product and the audience the better it will generally be received. If a science fiction author or producer wants a wide audience for her product, including a wide array of characters will help to appeal to a wide array of potential consumers.

Here, I will look at three books or series of books, two by white authors and one by a black author, that include portrayals of positive and engaging black characters. Interestingly enough considering Barnes' reference to Kay Bass, all three involve black women as warriors or in positions of leadership. The idea that a black woman can be a leader and a warrior, where a black

man cannot, is problematic here. This is indicative of the fact that too many people perceive strong black males as potential threats. Later, I will consider three television series that featured strong black characters. Even though the literature I will discuss was published after the television series I have chosen to include first aired I will take up books first, mainly because of the longer tradition of science fiction as literature.

### Three Books and Several Characters

Choosing texts to use to illustrate the improvement in portrayals of black characters in science fiction literature is becoming more difficult as new authors enter the genre and produce more high-quality material. The field of science fiction literature has become so large that it is impossible to read everything, even when the reader stays within a limited subgenre or group of subgenres. My personal tastes tend to the space opera subgenre, so several of my examples fit into that category. The space opera subgenre tends to include larger-than-life characters working on a large “stage” of, for example, interstellar war and/or galactic politics. Some good examples of this subgenre include not only the *Star Trek* television series and spinoffs, but the *Star Wars* films. David Hartwell defines space opera as “the Western in Space” (Hartwell 15). In a later chapter, Hartwell expands on this definition:

Many SF readers prefer this type of SF, usually cast as space opera, with good guys and villains, ray guns and spaceships, and the odd alien or three. It can be wonderful escape. But even in this kind of paraphernalia-filled adventure, you are being asked to believe, for a moment, in an adventurous, optimistic future filled with technological wonders and exceeding strangeness (96).

This sort of science fiction lends itself to very strong characters that stand out and are memorable. Therefore the novels and characters I have chosen to use may not be the best examples

out of the entire body of science fiction literature produced to date, but I have read each of these works multiple times and, in the case of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, I have studied the novel twice in an academic setting. A lifetime of reading science fiction provides me with the experience of having read many of the texts that make up the science fiction "canon" as constructed in the academy, as well as many texts and authors not as well received in the academy. My academic background includes four undergraduate courses in various aspects of science fiction literature. Science fiction is not just engaging and entertaining literature, but in the process of building the worlds in which the stories occur and the characters that act within these worlds science fiction authors are actively commenting on the society that they lived in at the time they were writing. Two of my three examples are particularly good illustrations of the projective or predictive social commentary that is a large part of the fabric of science fiction.

*Zelde M'Tana and Dystopian Space Opera*

First published in 1980, *Zelde M'Tana* by F. M. Busby is part of his Rissa Kerguelen series. The title character is a very young black woman who grew up among the Wild Children in a part of a future Earth governed by United Energy and Transport (UET), the conglomerate that "made the winning bid to govern North America in the last three elections" (Busby 19). Zelde is captured by a UET rehabilitation team after a UET team member killed Honcho, the leader of her group of kids. As a fighter, Zelde was Honcho's second-in-command. Her captors estimate her age at about 15, as Zelde herself has no idea herself how old she is (6) and they speculate about her origins: "Something though – she hadn't listened close, but the woman said like, 'When terrorists nuked the old U.N. building – remember? A festival upstate for a lot of the Embassy children – with all the confusion, nobody ever found out what happened to them. She could be –'" (7-8). Perhaps the possibility that Zelde's family had been in some way affiliated with the United Nations

influenced the decisions of the UET rehabilitation team, but the text doesn't give specific reasons for it. Instead of consigning Zelde to Total Welfare, an institution that characters in this novel describe as legalized slavery (33), the woman, Laina Polder, decides that Zelde is to be shipped out on the starship *Great Khan* to the cribs, or brothels, on the planet Iron Hat (20-21). Her first contact among the other human cargo, Turk Kestler, the senior representative of the Underground among the sixty women, explains that they were all destined to be prostitutes on a mining colony (24).

During the voyage, a group of junior officers and crew led by First Officer Parnell mutiny in order to escape UET authority and join the Underground. One of the mutineers offers the women in the cargo hold the option of throwing in with them, and the women accept the offer (35). In the fighting, Zelde, because of her fighting experience from her time with the Wild Children, leads one party of women upship, and takes out a UET holdout in a power suit to protect Parnell and the rest of the mutineers (39-40).

As the rest of the novel unfolds, Zelde tackles the ship's training programs and earns an officer's rank, but despite her actions on behalf of her shipmates and her general competence, her fellow officers are not able to work with an officer who came aboard ship as cargo rather than as even the lowest ranking recruit, and finally buy out her shares of the freed ship. The way Busby structures shipboard life, escaped ships' crew members own shares in the ship, which they can take in the form of cash or credit that can be used on planets that are part of the underground. Crew can leave of their own accord or be asked to leave, but get to take their shares with them.

It should be noted that her race and gender are not an issue. The ship's regular crew was mixed gender even prior to the mutiny. Race was not highlighted in descriptions of the rest of the crew, so it is difficult to make any accurate assessment of the racial mix, but since Zelde's race is

no more a point of contention than her gender, one can make a case that racial issues have faded in importance compared to the problem of corporate control of government. In fact, the series this book is part of paints a picture of a future Earth where corporations have taken over the tasks of government in such a way that the comfortable lives a few elites and their employees lead stand in sharp contrast to the lives lived by the masses of the poor and powerless warehoused by the Total Welfare system. Despite being first published more than 30 years ago, Busby's novel depicts a future that looks like one potential outcome to our current economic and political situation. This dystopian image of the future is so powerful that race and gender as points of division no longer seem to matter.

It is also worth noting that this novel is part of the space opera subgenre, leading readers to assume that the main character will be competent, make the right decisions more often than not, and triumph at the end of the tale. *Zelde M'Tana* follows this general outline in that Zelde's only problem results from secret UET sympathizers attempting to retake the ship and fatally injuring Parnell in the process, who by that time had become Zelde's lover. Later, when she buys her way into an officer's berth on another Escaped ship, her new captain offers her a similar opportunity, to be her lover, that she turns down, "keeping it straight" for herself and maintaining the difference between her job and her love life (315-6).

While neither *Zelde M'Tana* nor the Honor Harrington series, to be discussed next, have received much attention in the academy, their popularity as indicated by book sales speaks to a large following within the fan community. The edition of *Zelde M'Tana* used for citations here is a second edition, and books that do not sell well are unlikely to be reprinted, much less be picked up by a second publisher. The frequent appearances of parts of this next series on the New York

Times Best Seller lists<sup>9</sup> indicates a breadth of influence in the fan community that in fannish circles is more important than awards or academic recognition.

*The Honor Harrington Series and the House of Winton*

David Weber's Honor Harrington series is another example of space opera, but this storyline offers a generally more positive future for humanity than offered by Busby's series. While Honor Harrington is the main character in the series, which contains 13 novels so far, plus two side series with two novels each, Harrington's star nation is a monarchy whose reigning Winton family is black. Weber gives a very good description of the family, as well as the makeup of the rest of her home system's population, with that of Harrington's longtime friend, now her executive officer:

The Manticore Colony, Ltd., had drawn its original settlers primarily from Old Earth's western hemisphere, and five hundred T-years had gone far towards pureeing the original colonists' genetic heritages. There were exceptions – such as Honor herself, whose immigrant mother was of almost pure Old Earth Asian extraction by way of the ancient colony world of Beowulf – but by and large it was difficult to estimate anyone's ancestry at a glance.

Her new exec was an exception, however. Through whatever trick of genetics, Commander The Honorable Michelle Henke was a throwback to her first Manticoran ancestor's genotype. Her skin was barely a shade lighter than her space-black uniform, her hair was even curlier than Honor's . . . and there was no mistaking the clean-cut, distinctive features of the House of Winton (Weber, *The Short Victorious War*, 27).

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<sup>9</sup> According to the demonoid.me website, Weber has over seven million copies of his books in print and seventeen titles have appeared on the New York Times bestseller list.

An important thing to consider here is that the timeframe outlined – some 500 years after the original colonists arrived in the Manticore system – was long enough for intermarriage to blur many of the original settlers’ “racial” markers. This coupled with information that the future time Weber is writing about is some 2,000 years in our projected future suggested by many indicators from various novels within this series, implied that such a homogenization of such markers had been well on its way for a long time.

The first in-text view Weber gives us of Queen Elizabeth III herself echoes the black physiotype used to describe her cousin: “Her warm-tinted mahogany skin was lighter than Michelle Henke’s, but it was darker than most Manticorans’, and the similarity between her features and Henke’s was even more remarkable in person” (Weber, *Field of Dishonor* 43).

The descriptions in these two passages reinforce each other. Weber amply shows that the House of Winton is one of the few exceptions to the homogenization of humankind in this far future. But the best illustration of the fact that this fictional future world had long abandoned any notion of prejudice based on determination of race based on skin-color comes from an offshoot series by Weber and Eric Flint, which began with the novel *Crown of Slaves*. The novel centers on the trade in slaves who were genetically created and designed for particular tasks by the interstellar corporation Manpower Incorporated, and culminates with the Anti-Slavery League and the terrorist network of freed slaves called the Audubon Ballroom seizing a planet owned and operated by Manpower and founding their own star nation. Near the beginning of the novel, at a social gathering, W. E. B. Du Havel, a freed slave and scholar, is talking to a group of Manticorans about the history of slavery on Earth:

“You have to remember,” Du Havel explained, “that this was long before the Diaspora.

Several centuries before, in fact. In those days, genetic variation within the human race

was not only relatively simple, but largely allotropic. Longstanding genetic pools, most of them sharing a few simple and obviously visible somatic traits, only recently brought into systematic and regular contact with each other. As a result, those of them who shared a recent mutation which favored albinism and a few other superficial features, and which happened to be the predominant ‘race’ at the time, set about enslaving others. One in particular was favored for the purpose. A genetic variation which had settled into a temporary somatic mold in the continent of Africa. ‘Black’ people, they were called. It was assumed, based on the genetic pseudo-science of the time, that they were particularly suited for a servile existence. An assumption which, stripping away the superstitious claptrap, was based on nothing much more than the fact that they had dark skins, which were usually coupled with –“

He proceeded to give a quick sketch of the phenotype generally to be found among Africans of that ancient time. When he was done, most of the people in the crowd had a rather strained look on their faces. . . .

“I can’t *believe* it,” gasped a woman nearby. She was quite literally clutching her throat in distress. “Why . . . that would describe Queen Elizabeth!”

“Most of the House of Winton, going all the way back,” growled a man standing next to her. He glanced around. “Not to mention a considerable number of people in this room. I knew the ancients were full of insane superstitions, but –“ He gave Du Havel a look that was just short of a glare. “Are you sure about this?” (Weber and Flint 50-1).

This exchange indicates that the authors believe that divisions based on skin color will have been so far in the past as to be incomprehensible to the people in this fictional future. Despite the fact that Queen Elizabeth and Michelle Henke are not the main characters in the series and its

offshoots, the series' overarching tone indicates that race is no longer a factor in these descendants of colonists from Earth. Perhaps Weber, and Flint in this collaboration, paints this idea too broadly, but one would hope that black readers would find in Queen Elizabeth and the House of Winton an attachment point to identify with all of the characters in this series, and through that to a greater identification with the genre as a whole.

*Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower and Recognition*

Where F. M. Busby's only Hugo came from his pre-professional work, a fanzine, and David Weber has yet to be nominated for the award, the late Octavia E. Butler won two of these fan-voted awards.<sup>10</sup> Although neither was for her book *Parable of the Sower*, this novel provides one example of the many strong black characters in Butler's body of work. This novel depicts a dystopian future in which race is still an issue. Perhaps this is because the future being depicted begins in the year 2024 (Butler 1). The story opens with the main character and narrator, Lauren Olamina, turning fifteen amid deteriorating economic and ecological conditions. She and her family live outside of Los Angeles, and her father is a Baptist minister who holds services in their home. The neighborhood kids don't go to school anymore, and no one living inside the walls of their neighborhood goes outside unless absolutely necessary. "That way they don't have to risk going outside where things are so dangerous and crazy" (Butler 6). Just how dangerous and crazy the outside has become is illustrated when Lauren, her father and several neighborhood children go to a church outside the neighborhood for a baptism:

There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years

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<sup>10</sup> As noted in The Locus Index to Science Fiction Awards  
(<http://web.archive.org/web/20100102235534/http://locusmag.com/SFAwards/index.html>)

old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face. . . .

I must have seemed jumpy. I glanced around like a bird, not letting my gaze rest on anyone longer than it took me to see that they weren't coming in my direction or aiming anything at me . . . .

By the time we reached the fortress-church, my jaw-muscles hurt from clinching and unclenching my teeth, and overall, I was exhausted (13).

The unrest and lawlessness increases to the point that Lauren's walled neighborhood is attacked and burned, and her family is killed. She gathers what clothing and food she can find from the shell of her family home, together with a cache of money and weapons that had been hidden for just such an emergency, and heads north out of the Los Angeles area with neighbors Harry and Zahra. In the first discussion of race in the novel, they decide how to portray themselves travelling:

"I was thinking of traveling as a man," I [Lauren] said to him [Harry].

He seemed to be repressing a smile. "That will be safer for you. You're at least tall enough to fool people. You'll have to cut your hair, though."

Zahra grunted. "Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight. Harry'll piss off all the blacks, and you'll piss off all the whites. Good luck."

I watched her as she said it, and realized what she wasn't saying. "You want to come?" I asked.

She sniffed. "Why should I? I won't cut my hair."

"No need," I said. "We can be a black couple and their white friend. If Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe we can claim him as a cousin."

She hesitated, then whispered, “Yeah, I want to go.” And then she started to cry.

Harry stared at her in surprise.

“Did you think we were going to just dump you?” I asked. “All you had to do was let us know.”

“I don’t have any money,” she said. “Not a dollar.”

I sighed. “Where did you get those peaches?”

“You were right. I stole them.”

“You have a useful skill, then, and information about living out here.” I faced Harry. “What do you think?”

“Her stealing doesn’t bother you?” he asked.

“I mean to survive,” I said (Butler 171-2).

Here, we find out not only that race is a factor in the world Butler has created, but that a mixed-race couple is still a likely target for bigotry. Lauren has also chosen pragmatism over her religious upbringing and has become the leader of this small group, which will grow over the course of the novel. Leadership ability is so often part of a main character’s standard equipment in the science fiction genre that readers may find it hard to engage with a character who lacks this characteristic. Even in stories where overt leadership is not part of the storyline, characters who cannot manage themselves in difficult situations generally fail to get the average science fiction reader’s attention. In early science fiction these strong capable characters were invariably male and white, but this is no longer the case, and the genre is much stronger for the change.

Strong female characters in leadership roles in novels have become more common over the years, but here we have three novels featuring main characters and/or recurring important supporting characters who are not only female but black. While I did not intentionally choose to

highlight female characters in this admittedly brief discussion of black characters in science fiction novels, the fact that the characters discussed so far have been female segues well into our discussion of black characters in science fiction television, beginning with *Star Trek* and Lieutenant Uhura.

### Media Portrayals of Black Characters

Steven Barnes outlined some of the history of black characters in science fiction and action film and television through the 1960's, indicating that for the most part the black male characters in these shows were there "only to die horribly, and usually to protect white people" (265). Desilu Studios made a leap, according to Barnes, in the mid 1960's with black costars Bill Cosby in *I Spy* and Greg Morris in *Mission Impossible*(267). The year the later series began, Desilu Studios released *Star Trek* with Nichelle Nichols cast as Lt. Uhura. Barnes writes "even though relegated to the background, she was there, a recognizable human being of intelligence and courage, and I felt proud" (268).

The success of *Star Trek* among fans eventually led to the spin-off series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that featured LeVar Burton as Geordi LaForge, a blind black officer who used a prosthetic device in order to see. This series started in 1987. A second spin-off in the *Star Trek* franchise, *Deep Space Nine*, first aired in 1993, and featured Avery Brooks in the starring role of Captain Ben Sisko, a black man and commander of the space station. The next year (1994) featured the first airing of *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, a short-lived series about a paraplegic black research scientist who invents an elaborate exoskeleton that allows him to walk, and in the process becomes a crime-fighting superhero. These shows illustrate an increase in the number of important black characters, particularly male black characters in significant roles, on science fiction television

programs. This increased visibility was also spreading to other forms of popular culture. Here I will look at these series, particularly *Star Trek*, *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, and *Deep Space Nine*.

*Star Trek, Race, and the Famous First Kiss*

Firsts in any area of popular culture garner attention no matter what they involve, but *Star Trek* has the distinction of airing the first interracial kiss on network television. Set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, this kiss, which aired in 1968 in the episode “Plato’s Stepchildren,” was both shocking and symbolic:

The threat of this kiss to the social establishment of the time is not to be underestimated. That the kiss had to be staged as an unwilling act – forced upon Captain Kirk and Lt. Uhura by their alien captors – demonstrates the transgressive power of that kiss. It is through interracial sexual transgression, more than through any other interracial relationship, that the boundaries of race in the U.S. are most challenged because of the potential for the boundaries of racialized groupings to be blurred by children of mixed heritage (Dariotis 65).

This observation, in the chapter “Crossing the Racial Frontier: *Star Trek* and Mixed Heritage Identities” by Wei Ming Dariotis, is prefaced by Nichelle Nichols’s statement that her grandparents were an interracial couple who could not legally marry (64-65). Considered in relation to two of my examples from literature, namely David Weber’s Honor Harrington series in which the majority of humanity 2,000 years in the future is of mixed heritage, and Butler’s nearer future where a mixed race couple still draws negative attention, the idea that Roddenberry could air this scene in 1968 is remarkable. In Butler’s narrative, set in a future nearer our own, a mixed race couple is at once less common and more of a social taboo than would be the case in Weber’s future, where humans are marked by a lack of or blurring of visual markers of race such as skin

color. What was shocking to see on television in 1968 became less problematic but was still cause for concern in Butler's depiction of 2024, and was then such a non-issue in Weber's future world that the idea that race could once have been a problem was met with disbelief.

The episode "Plato's Stepchildren" aired during *Star Trek's* third season, and had it not been for a chance meeting, Nichelle Nichols would have left the series after the first season. In fact, according to an interview included on the PBS series *Pioneers in Television*, which aired in the winter of 2011, she had told Roddenberry she was leaving. But then at a NAACP event the weekend after she resigned, she met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She said in the interview, "I turned in my seat, and there was Dr. Martin Luther King with a big smile on his face. He said, 'I am a Trekker, I am your biggest fan.'" When she told him she was leaving the show, he persuaded her not to:

"'He was telling me why I could not [resign],' she recalls. 'He said I had the first nonstereotypical role, I had a role with honor, dignity and intelligence. He said, 'You simply cannot abdicate, this is an important role. This is why we are marching. We never thought we'd see this on TV.'"

Nichols was at a loss for words. It was the first time the importance of being an African-American woman on television had sunk in. She returned to "Star Trek" creator Gene Roddenberry the next Monday morning and rescinded her resignation.

He sat there and looked at me and said, 'God bless Dr. Martin Luther King. Somebody does understand me,' "Nichols says" ([http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-01-17/entertainment/27087605\\_1\\_lieutenant-uhura-nichols-today-gene-roddenberry](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2011-01-17/entertainment/27087605_1_lieutenant-uhura-nichols-today-gene-roddenberry)).

So that seminal first interracial kiss might never have happened, or might have happened differently if Nichols and Dr. King had not met that weekend. Even though Lt. Uhura was not one

of the major characters in the series, she represented a crew member as competent in her own duties as the Captain, First Officer, Ship's Doctor or Chief Engineer. *Star Trek* is also a media example of the space opera subgenre, and as such the principle characters are expected to exhibit not only competence in their assigned duties but courage and competence in many other areas as well. As a character, Lt. Uhura works as part of a well-trained crew, and while opening hailing frequencies may not be as glamorous a job as being Captain would be, she is respected by the rest of the crew for her role and the skills she brings. Her race, gender, or even the fact that she is Human rather than Vulcan is irrelevant in Roddenberry's vision of the future. Her role and the popularity of the series paved the way for the spin-off series, such as *Deep Space Nine*.

*Deep Space 9 and a Black Commanding Officer*

In 1993 the first episode of the second spin-off series in the *Star Trek* franchise aired. *Deep Space 9* followed in the footsteps of Roddenberry's previous offerings, and upped the ante with a black Starfleet captain as commanding officer of a space station:

Perfect color-blindness has always been part of Gene Roddenberry's positive vision for the future, an aspect of *The Original Series* that made it groundbreaking in the 1960s for depicting a racially mixed crew. Berman and Piller have since kept Roddenberry's dream alive in their stewardship of the STAR TREK universe, and though, at first, the commander of DS9 might have been male or female or of any race, as Berman and Piller refined their conception of their show, they decided it was time for a black Starfleet officer to have center stage (Reeves-Stevens & Reeves-Stevens 177).

It is important to note that, while the early concept of the series did not specify a race or gender for the station commander, Berman and Piller deliberately decided to make the character a black man, following the trajectory Roddenberry began with the character of Lt. Uhura in the

original series. As with many of our other examples from both literature and media, *Deep Space Nine* is in the space opera tradition. Captain Sisko follows the rules of this subgenre in that a character in the role of a military officer, especially a commanding officer, is expected to be competent. Here, the ability to do the job is much more important than distinctions of race or gender. “Because *Deep Space Nine* scripts make nothing of the fact that Sisko is black, Brooks says that part of the character doesn’t enter into his performance. Instead, he simply plays a person, the color of whom is no longer important in the twenty-fourth century” (Reeves-Stevens & Reeves-Stevens 178).

Perhaps if we humans make it to the twenty-fourth century, distinctions of race and skin color will no longer be important, but in mainstream society of the here-and-now they still are. Another television series from the mid-1990s at once agrees with the trope that competence is (or should be) more important than skin color and at the same time illustrates racial differences that still exist in the United States.

#### *M.A.N.T.I.S. and the Super Hero Image*

Heroes serve important functions in culture as well as in the emotional lives of those who consume their tales. The character M.A.N.T.I.S. is a good example of a modern-day hero in that many of the characteristics and virtues of the classic comic book hero are in evidence here, but with the innovative twist that the hero is also a member of a cultural minority.

Heroes in popular culture, and particularly the superhero model popularized in classic comic books, conform in some ways to the hero model of myth and folktale as described by Lord Raglan and others. However, these characters also depart from these long-standing models in ways that speak to our changing society and values. An example is the short-lived television program *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, which aired on the FOX network for one season beginning in 1994. Instead of the

typical white male hero/superhero, we see an African-American. The racial issues in this narrative are not explicitly highlighted, but the potential inspiration that this character gave to black youth is obvious and important.

But *M.A.N.T.I.S.* is also part of the superhero tradition that began in comic books such as Superman. As in many of these superhero story lines, this series depicts an apparently non-heroic person of average ability and demeanor whose heroic alter ego allows him to possess and be able to display an ability or set of abilities beyond that of the average human. These characters have by and large been white men, with notable exceptions such as Wonder Woman. Some black superhero comics came out in the 1970's, after the brief popularity of blaxploitation film (Brown 34), but a different kind of black comic superhero was born in several series presented by a black-owned comic publisher Milestone Comics, launched in 1993, the year before *M.A.N.T.I.S.* was released (Brown 25). Oddly enough, Brown's interviews with comic fans indicate that they thought the show was a comedy rather than "a serious science fiction drama" (34).

To tie *M.A.N.T.I.S.* into this milieu, we see the strong character and weak alter ego trope of mainstream comics coupled with the technological or scientific intellectualism of the protagonist who primarily uses brains rather than brawn. There is thus an attempt to pull attention away from the idea that the black male body is only physically powerful, which hearkens back to the error-filled and racist assumption that there is a connection between race and intelligence. The issue of race is essential to this narrative.

Superhero comics, like other fantasy-based material such as science fiction, have the broadest appeal to young people who are seeking role models with some form of personal agency that they themselves lack. For some, these role models are sports figures, music or movie stars, while for others, fictional characters such as these comic book superheroes like Superman and

Spider-Man are more attractive. In a newspaper column from 2001 about heroes, Leonard Pitts, Jr., agrees with this assessment, writing that Americans lack credible living heroes, and he relates how, when they were in the seventh grade, he and his friends debated the relative merits of Superman and Spider-Man.

“That’s what larger-than-life figures do, after all. They give us dreams, teach us to aspire. People who model courage have the unique ability to lift us out of ourselves, to reveal unglimped possibilities,” Pitts writes.

Disability is another layer of identification at work here. Dr. Miles Hawkins, the mundane alter-ego of the M.A.N.T.I.S., is a paraplegic man in a wheelchair. Thus, this character could be inspirational not only for black youth, but also for young people with disabilities. While this potential can be seen as a good thing, the idea that, as with the Geordi LaForge character in *Star Trek: the Next Generation*, played by LeVar Burton, in order for a black man to be permitted an intellect he must have a disability is problematic.

This disability was the impetus for a technological solution that would let Dr. Hawkins walk again. In fact, this superhero status was an accident. Hawkins, portrayed by Carl Lumbly, was discussing two separate experiments with his assistant John Stonebrake, played by Roger Rees, when they decided to try the two systems together -- the exoskeleton and a helmet device that was originally intended to control a vehicle. This combination allowed nerve impulses to mechanically bypass the damaged nerves and allow Hawkins to walk again. While playing basketball late at night and being able to jump high enough to get his entire torso above the rim when he field tested the combination system, Hawkins hears a young woman being attacked at a nearby rave, and intervenes on her behalf. A local bicycle courier attending the rave witnesses the incident, and the next day is telling his story to the cadre of other couriers, describing the figure as

looking like an insect, a Praying Mantis. This young man, Taylor Savage, played by Christopher Gartin, tracks down Dr. Hawkins, and becomes an insider in his organization, mainly through threatening that he could expose Hawkins (*M.A.N.T.I.S.* episode 1). The exoskeleton system is called the Mechanically Automated NeuroTransmitter Interactive System, with M.A.N.T.I.S. as the acronym.

As the series unfolds, the temptation to continue using the suit and its power is seductive, as this exchange in Episode 9, in which Stonebrake insists that Hawkins could put on the exoskeleton without becoming the M.A.N.T.I.S. indicates. Hawkins replies:

“There’s this feeling of power, incredible power. At first it was enough to be walking again, but now . . . I feel the need to use the power. It compels me. It’s almost . . .” Hawkins trails off. “Addictive.” Stonebrake finishes for him (“Fire in the Heart,” first aired 10-21-1994).

Part of why the M.A.N.T.I.S. persona is addictive could be tied to how Hawkins became disabled in the first place. While trying to assist an injured child during a riot, Dr. Hawkins was shot in the back and rendered paraplegic. Since the riot was labeled as racially motivated, this also connects to Dr. Hawkins’ background. This impulse to help those in trouble carries over into his actions in the M.A.N.T.I.S. persona, and the idea that he as a black man is injured while helping a child during a race riot is ironic.

So here we have a series that, resonating with the character of Captain Sisko in *Deep Space Nine*, places a black man in a role which many areas of popular culture deny him. In *Deep Space Nine* we have a black man in a position of supreme authority over an entire large space station. In *M.A.N.T.I.S.* we have a black man with a doctorate in a scientific discipline and who, despite being paraplegic, has a superhero alter ego. These images in broadcast television were the exception to most of television fare at their time, in which black men, when they appeared in programs at all,

were at best police officers or teachers, but more often drug dealers or other criminals. These stereotypical roles are a strong indication that essentialism and the social construction of race are alive and well in popular culture.

### Conclusion

As Steven Barnes indicated earlier, the 1960s was a time of change in the science fiction genre, mirroring the social and cultural changes brought on by the civil rights movement. Much has been written about the large roll the original *Star Trek* played in this change, and justifiably so. As Geraghty relates:

The May30, 2004, issue of *TV Guide* voted *Star Trek* the “top cult show ever” out of 25 lucky hopefuls. The reason, according to the small write-up, was that “the series (and its spin-offs) all but created fan obsession, conventions, and an enduring link between science fiction and geekdom . . . .” In other words, *TV Guide* has deemed that *Star Trek* changed the face of television programming (Geraghty 1).

While many science fiction fans would disagree that conventions and fan obsession started with *Star Trek*, the program and the influence it had on fan culture made an impression on fans of the genre who came into fan culture mainly through the literature, and from there to the writers and producers who depended on this fan base. If a strong black character, even though she was not one of the main characters of the program, could attract fans who might not otherwise pay much attention to the genre, what would happen if such characters appeared in print in the science fiction pulps? There are still not many such characters, or black authors writing in the genre, but we have seen an increase since the mid 1960s and *Star Trek*.

Despite the overarching themes of scientific and political progress in science fiction and comics, there is still a strong strain of conventionality in character portrayals. Perhaps this explains

why *M.A.N.T.I.S.* only lasted one season. This conventionality also plays into the cycle of consumer to creator in the combined genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror within popular culture. When consumers of a form of popular culture do not see characters they can identify with, they look elsewhere in popular culture, such as popular music or sports, which have more black figures, for those role models. Fans, or those with a higher interest in the cultural product, come from the ranks of casual readers and viewers. Fans in turn, as my analysis of fandom and its place in the commercial reality of science fiction shows, have influence on what is produced. Fan culture also provides an incubator and a testing ground for new writers. Writers and artists then tend to produce the kind of material they themselves have enjoyed, and often depict characters like themselves. This goes full-circle, with the characters and stories influencing yet more potential authors.

Thus, if popular culture begins to show strong, positive characters from the full range of races, genders, sexualities and classes, those levels of abstraction will be reduced. Even if a young person has few positive role models he or she can identify with among family members or teachers, fictional heroes could offer more diverse characters to emulate. The examples I have listed so far point toward more egalitarian portrayals of blacks in science fiction literature and visual media, but in order for interest in science fiction to no longer be associated mainly with white readers and viewers, more competent, skillful minority characters are needed in visible positions of authority. Perhaps a positive side effect for society as a whole will be that blacks and other minorities will not only see an interest in science fiction as an acceptable hobby, or writing and producing science fiction cultural products as a possible career, but also that an interest in science and technology is equally acceptable.

But to find out how personal identification with characters in science fiction literature, film and television influences black fans, as well as other factors that affect activities such as convention attendance, we need to talk to black fans. Their responses to these questions comprise the next chapter.

## CHAPTER IV

### BLACK FANS EXPERIENCE FANDOM: IN THEIR OWN WORDS AND THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHER FANS

Despite the barriers to an interest in science fiction and the subsequent participation in science fiction fan culture, an increasing number of black fans are reading science fiction literature, watching the films and television programs, and then becoming interested in fan activities including conventions. Bearing in mind that barriers to this level of participation in fandom still exist, and that racist attitudes still exist in America, some of the questions I asked the black science fiction fans I interviewed involved what science fiction literature or media first caught their interest, when and why they first started attending conventions, and how they were received and treated by the other fans they encountered at the conventions. Answers to these questions were wide-ranging, but several trends became apparent, both from the interviews and written accounts by black science fiction authors. After a brief analysis of the demographics of the people I interviewed, I will look at the types of science fiction or other materials that brought these individuals into an interest in the genre. After that, I will discuss their convention experiences, including what first interested them in attending their first convention. I will also share a story that my only white interviewee related regarding how white fans responded to a Jim Crow incident in the early 1950s, and other incidents that show how race was perceived in the science fiction community during that time. Finally, I will look at what my subjects said about changes they have seen in black participation in convention fandom, as well as any opinions they shared on why black fans don't attend science fiction conventions.

Who Were the Informants?

I interviewed twelve individuals in the course of my research. I spoke with or corresponded with five black males, six black females and one white female. One of the black males and three of the black females identified themselves as being of mixed heritage. Juanita Coulson, my white female informant, was chosen because she has been involved in science fiction fan culture and history from the early 1950s on (she is now 79 years old), and was active in the civil rights movement. The respondents ranged in age from 33 to 79, but two respondents did not give their age, and four of my informants were in their 40s and another four were in their 50s. The 40 to 60 age range was by far the largest.

All respondents had received at least some college education. One respondent has a doctorate, one a Juris Doctor, two have Master's degrees, three have Bachelor's degrees and two have Associate's degrees. Three live in Columbus, Ohio, one in London, Ohio, one in Cleveland and four in Cincinnati. Other respondents live in Tucson, Arizona; Atlanta, Georgia; and Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Two of my out-of-state contacts I found through social media, and one at a convention in the Detroit area. The Ohio residents I interviewed I found through local conventions and either interviewed them on-site or via email after the convention. Everyone I asked to participate did so. My method for gathering respondents was somewhat hampered by not being able to range far from Ohio to attend conventions.

I have also looked at accounts from black science fiction authors regarding their participation in fandom both before and after they became established authors. Between these authors and my own small group of informants, I hope to identify and analyze common threads from these narratives.

Books, Movies or Television: What Pulled Them In

My informants became interested in science fiction conventions and fan activity through a wide range of early interests, and can be easily divided into two camps – readers and watchers. About half of my respondents belong to each group, with six being readers and five being watchers. (I did not count my white informant in either camp because my main research question here concerns blacks in fandom).

The readers' first exposure to the genre was often classic science fiction such as *Dune* by Frank Herbert or *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. For others comic books were their first entry into the genre. For one respondent, fairy tales led to fantasy literature, and from there on to science fiction and comic books.

One such narrative, from Diane McFarland, 49, illustrates well how her interest in comics had lead to an interest in science fiction:

About the age of 13 I was given a special giant issue of *Conan the Barbarian* with Barry Windsor-Smith doing the artwork. I noticed on the cover it said "Based on the novels of Robert E. Howard." Found the novels in the library and fell in love with that part of the SF&F genre. As for Science Fiction, it all started with the Yes song "Starship Trooper," one of my all-time favorite songs. I was about 15 years old, wandering a bookstore, and saw a paperback called *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein. 'Could this be the book the song is based on?' I asked myself. I bought the book. The answer was no, but by the end of the book I didn't care. I went to the library and checked out everything with his name on it. Believe it or not, I had not heard of Science Fiction as a literary genre. TV and movies, yes, books no. I've been in love with it ever since (McFarland, email interview, 2 June 2011).

Another of my informants, Don McCoy, 56, who despite his interest in the genre has not attended a regular science fiction convention (although he did attend a gaming<sup>11</sup> event at The Ohio State University), came to the genre in a different way:

As a student employee in the library, one of my first jobs was to reshelve books, and later to sort them out in the sorting area. So I would come across different titles that I would find interesting. And then one title would lead to another. For instance, if I was reading something by Sheckley or Zelazny, it would lead me to other books that they've written (McCoy oral interview, 23 May 2011).

In a somewhat more conventional entry into the genre, namely reading science fiction coupled with an interest in science, Bob Brodis relates how his mother, a public school teacher in Detroit, encouraged him to think he could be the “first colored man in space” when Kennedy launched the space program in 1961. His real start reading science fiction was *A Wrinkle in Time*:

“It’s funny that although basic multiplication was beyond me geometry and the idea of a tesseract excited my imagination. Thereafter, the Scholastic Book Club played an important role in my reading habits. There, I was introduced to Asimov and Heinlein and many other authors who also wrote for children” (Brodis email interview, 20 December 2011).

The texts potential science fiction fans are first exposed usually depend on when they begin reading or paying attention to what is on television, and can vary based on personal circumstances. In McFarland’s case, an interest in comics and a gift started her on the path to fandom. In McCoy’s case, he did not find science fiction literature until he was in college. Brodis, due to an interest in space exploration, discovered science fiction at an earlier age. Fans whose initial contact is through

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<sup>11</sup> Gaming involves role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, and such gaming is a common feature of science fiction convention programming.

television or movies have similar experiences. What catches the eye and imagination depends on the time, place, taste, and age of the potential fan.

Black fans whose interest in science fiction began with media offerings tell of a variety of programs or films that first caught their attention, but the original *Star Trek* series was mentioned by several of my informants. Some of my older informants cite monster movies and other science fiction films as the first media offerings in the genre they became interested in. My youngest interviewee indicated that an interest in anime, loosely defined as Japanese or Japanese-inspired animated television programs or films, brought her to science fiction

“I have watched sci-fi shows since I was old enough to watch TV,” said Ron Poole, 47. “I can’t remember a time when I did not watch *Star Trek* and *Lost in Space* reruns, and shows from Japan (Johnny Socko, Ultraman)” (Poole email interview, 19 May 2011).

A similar take on how important *Star Trek* was in sparking interest in science fiction comes from Julie Washington, 50:

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, my friend would come to the lunch table every day and ask if we had seen the previous night’s *Star Trek* episode. Eventually I started to tune in and was hooked. It was in the 1970s, when Paramount started putting out books, calendars, etc. I devoured it all, and began learning about the wider world of SF because many SF authors wrote episodes for *Trek*. In college, I took a course in SF literature, and friends encouraged me to read more widely. *Starlog* magazine was also a big educational influence; it taught me about the pulps, John W. Campbell, the Hugo’s and so on (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

Although early science fiction films and the watershed series *Star Trek* attracted an early generation of potential black fans, more recent media offerings have influenced the fans. “I’ve read

some fantasy fiction in the past,” said Kay Clopton, 33, “but it was through the medium of anime that I was exposed to science fiction, and I worked my way in from there” (Clopton email interview, 10 June 2011).

So here we see that an interest in science fiction, whether literary, televised or filmed, often provided the impetus for fans to take their interest further. But what motivated these people to take that next step and attend a convention? And for those who do not choose to attend conventions, what, other than the ideas I proposed in Chapter II, could be a factor here? My interview subjects had a lot to say about these issues.

#### Is there a Conventional Route to Fandom?

My informants gave many accounts of how they came to attend their first science fiction convention. Three found conventions from print or media mention, one from the convention ads in the back of *Analog* magazine and another from the gaming magazine *Dragon*, and yet another from the documentary films *Trekkies* and *Trekkies II*. One attended her first convention because she belonged to a local science fiction club and some other members were planning on attending a con. Two attended their first convention due to friends inviting them, and one due to her husband asking her to accompany him to a con. One whose friend invited her and the woman whose husband wanted her to come with him claim they were “dragged kicking and screaming” to their first convention, but have attended many since then. Two others decided to attend their first convention either to meet science fiction authors or to find other people who shared their interest in the genre.

One of the most intriguing tales of a first exposure to science fiction conventions comes from Julie Washington:

I organized an SF con at OSU [The Ohio State University] (Columbus, Ohio) before I had ever been to one. Hey, I had read about them; wasn't that good enough? We did two cons in 1980 and 1981, when I was 19 and 20. Our GoH's<sup>12</sup> were Harlan Ellison, and Joe and Gay Haldeman. I had read about conventions in *Starlog* magazine, especially the legendary early *Star Trek* cons that Bjo Trimble<sup>13</sup> organized. The idea of being with people who shared my passion seemed very exciting. In the pre-internet days, it was a lot harder to connect with like-minded people and get information about your favorite authors, shows and movies. I was desperate to find other fans. There were none at my high school, and I had only found a handful at Ohio State (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

This is a most unusual entrance into convention fandom, as most fans who choose to run a convention or assist in running one have attended at least a few such events. My own experience was of first belonging to a science fiction club and then attending conventions with some of the other club members. A personal connection helps pave the way into fandom for many people, as the following narrative indicates:

I was drug kicking and screaming, Seriously though, my first convention was DragonCon. I went because a friend of mine asked me to assist with Security. I didn't attend any panels or anything at that time because I was busy helping out but I did enjoy it. The first convention I really ATTENDED was either DragonCon, OVFF (Ohio Valley Filk Festival) or MilleniCon (Frazier email interview, 2 June 2011).

The issue of being invited, sometimes energetically, by friends is even more important when considered in contrast to the example of my informant who had never attended a convention, Don McCoy: "I don't know anyone close enough that had gone themselves or that would mention

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<sup>12</sup> Guests of Honor.

<sup>13</sup> Bjo Trimble (first name pronounced BeeJoe) has been credited in multiple accounts as having led the letter writing campaign to keep *Star Trek* on the air for its third season.

it to me that they were going and invite me. And I was thinking about this more seriously, earlier today when I knew you were coming, and it is not necessarily something that's marketed toward the black community" (McCoy oral interview).

From my own experience, conventions advertize through the convention listings in the remaining few pulp magazines and other publications such as gaming magazines, through fliers distributed at other science fiction conventions and ads in the program books produced for other conventions, mailings to previous attendees of the convention in question, and more recently through their own websites and social media such as facebook and twitter. These methods mainly target the pre-existing fan base, or those who are already either attending conventions or who might be likely to attend one. I do not believe that there is any intentional refusal to market conventions to the black community as much as an attempt to target the convention's advertizing campaign toward areas that would potentially yield the most attendees.

As I stated above, many conventions use the convention listings in the back of the remaining pulp magazines as one method of advertizing, and many fans find conventions from these ads. Chris Barkley relates one such instance from the summer of 1976 when he was visiting a friend who had a subscription to *Analog*:

I was going through it and the back of it had Analytical Laboratory and all this other stuff plus convention listings, and I noticed MidWestCon had a little ad in there and I said to Michaela "hey, there's a convention going on in Norwood." And she says "Oh, that's just for writers, they'll just throw us out." And I said "what's the worst that could happen?" So I said "I'm going." We were only one neighborhood removed from MidWestCon; it's like only two miles west. So I'm going over to this convention, it was like next weekend or something (Barkley oral interview, 27 August 2011).

So, we see here samples of the initial impetus to attend a science fiction convention and some of the motivations for participation in fan culture. Now that we've gotten our black fans to the convention, what happens next? Did they find the other science fiction fans that, as Julie Washington related, they were desperate to find? Did those who were dragged kicking and screaming by friends or spouses find that they liked what they discovered, and were they welcomed by the fans they met?

#### Reception and Perception: Black Fan meets Fandom

Of all my informants, the only one who did not report being well-received at science fiction conventions was the one who had never attended a con. Most responses indicated feeling accepted, and that fans were friendly. Chris Barkley's response is typical: "The folks at Cincinnati Fantasy Group didn't treat me any differently than anyone else. I knew I was with the right group of folks when they didn't make an issue of me being African-American or the fact that I liked *Star Trek* or anything else." He also mentioned another black member of the club who has been a regular since 1971 (Barclay oral interview, 27 August 2011).

Julie Washington also said she was received well by white fans at science fiction conventions:

Well, I felt as if I had found a home immediately. People who knew what I was talking about! People who loved it too! My best memory is that I made friends with three women from Pennsylvania. They were producing a zine<sup>14</sup>, which really impressed me. We all piled in a car and went to McDonald's for lunch, where we laughed and talked for a long time. I exchanged info with one of the women, and I kept that little piece of paper tucked up in my home office for years. To me, it symbolized the best of what fandom is all about – making

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<sup>14</sup> A fanzine, or zine, is a fan-produced magazine or newsletter that can have content or themes relating to fandom, science fiction, art, folk music, or anything else the producer or other fans are interested in.

instant connections, instant bonds with other fans (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

While black fans have been accepted just as white convention attendees are, the fact that they are still comparatively underrepresented at conventions can at times make black fans feel conspicuous. As Celeste Frazier put it:

Most science fiction conventions I've attended are colorblind. Everyone has one common interest, and that is being a fan. My only problems came when I began speaking to people. I swear everyone believes Black people are ignorant or something. Strangely, the next time DragonCon came around, I was sent a program with a dozen author signatures saying "Where were you this year?" It was rather amusing. I have heard the comment "Wow, you don't see a lot of black people here!" before though. I usually reply, "This is not exactly a 'Black' thing, but those of us who really are interested will pay the money to come" (Frazier email interview, 2 June 2011).

Also seeing this sort of mixed message from white fans, Julie Washington observed that: While fans are welcoming, I also have to "prove" why I am here.

I remember a white male fan explaining WorldCon to me in detail, when I had already been to two WorldCons. I kept trying to tell him that, and he kept explaining. Sometimes, in the early days before I was well-known, I was treated like a "girlfriend" – as if I was a mundane that someone had dragged along, and not a fangirl in my own right" (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

Black fans attending conventions could very well interpret such treatment by white fans as offensive, akin to being treated like the very aliens depicted in the science fiction genre, and be less inclined to continue attending conventions. This sort of behavior from white fans, while it is

not overt banning of minorities from the ranks of fandom, can be seen as at best an unconscious expression of bias and at worse a subtle means of discouraging black participation in fandom. Two of my eleven respondents related similar experiences of not being taken as legitimate fans. These fans persevered in attending conventions despite such experiences, but if the experience of nearly 20 percent of my admittedly small sample size reflects a common experience, this may be an additional factor in why black people are underrepresented in convention-based fandom. This reaction, the implication that black people are not welcome in fandom, could disincline a black fan from attending another convention in which he or she might experience the same reaction. From my own experience in meeting the first black fan I ever met, he was at the time the insider and I the outsider to the culture, so I accepted him as part of the normal structure of fandom. It was not until later that I realized he was a rarity in fandom.

Echoing the theme of few black attendees at conventions, which I noticed myself when I first became active in convention-going fandom, fantasy author Charles R. Saunders had this observation about his early days in fandom:

At that time, I was a dedicated fan of the genre; immersed in its strengths and weaknesses, attending conventions at which mine was often the only black face – although some attendees in costume painted their skin green or blue or polka-dot. Now I'm more of a semi-detached observer, having retreated from fandom and greatly reduced my reading in the field (quoted in Thomas I, 398).

In Ron Poole's account of his first convention experience, being black was not as much of an issue as his size:

I think I was noticed as being a stranger to the regulars in the very very start of the convention, but I myself was perhaps a little stiff and lost, so I may have made people a bit

uncomfortable. I would not say I was unwelcomed at all, but someone of my physical size and height tends to get noticed, and I do become self conscious about how I come off to others. However I started running into people I knew right away, including one of my very best friends! We started hanging out, and to me the environment felt looser and more comfortable after some time had passed (Poole email interview, 19 May 2011).

Poole's race may have been more of a factor than he realized, as many large white males in fandom are not greeted the same way that a large black man would be.

When asked about her first convention experience in 1982, science fiction author Nalo Hopkinson remembers her college science fiction club encouraging her to attend the convention in costume, and tells about how she decided the only black female character she thought the rest of the attendees would recognize was Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek*. She described how she designed and made her own costume, even using her sewing machine's embroidery capability to make the insignia (Nelson 107-8). Here is how she describes conventions in general:

I think I'd have to describe what's common to them all, which is science fiction community. And frankly, though I can sometimes find some of the ways of the community vexing and strange, I'm still blown away by a literature that has a following so strong that the readership voluntarily organizes conventions where writers, readers, gamers, costumers, actors, critics, and the occasional scholar can meet, hang out, and play. I could probably attend a con every weekend of the year on this continent. This wouldn't happen if I were writing purely mimetic literary fiction.

It's a very strange and very specialized environment, but out of that comes a strong sense of community, and I value that. I also value that the community is made up of the folks like me who were the weirdo's in school, who couldn't figure out why lipstick could

only be some shade of red, or why a relationship was supposed to happen between only two people, or why men weren't supposed to wear lace miniskirts (109).

Hopkinson's observations here regarding the people who gravitate to the science fiction fan community are applicable to both black people and white people whose attitudes don't match up with those of the rest of society, and who enjoy science fiction because this literary genre also calls into question many of these same societal attitudes. We see from these personal observations that black fans have for the most part been welcomed by the rest of the fannish population attending conventions, at least in recent decades. But have black fans always been welcomed at conventions? In the next section we will see that not all white fans have been without racial prejudice, but also that some have been very much aware of racially-based social injustices and have worked to expose these injustices and stop them from happening.

#### Fandom in the 1950s, Jim Crow and All

Juanita Coulson got her start in fandom in the early 1950s as a member of the Indianapolis Science Fiction Club. Since then she has been a Hugo-winning fanzine publisher, a professional science fiction author, and is well-known as a filk performer. In her sixty years of fan activity she has witnessed a lot of fan history. Although she herself did not personally witness this incident in 1953, another science fiction club member, Buck Coulson, whom she would later marry, was one of the three main participants. She describes this disturbing incident as follows:

Early on, at the '53 MidWestCon [held in the Cincinnati, Ohio area], a black femfan<sup>15</sup> was denied accommodations at the con hotel – room reservation abruptly cancelled when the clerk got a look at her, solely on the basis of color. And because her fellow fans in the car pool, Gene DeWeese and my husband-to-be Buck Coulson, when dealing with the desk clerk said “Give her our room and we'll sleep in the car” – suddenly NO ONE had a

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<sup>15</sup> A fannish term for female fan.

reservation. They were forced to drive straight back to Indiana and missed the con completely. I was waiting to rendezvous with them, having arrived by bus and rooming with another femfan. And nobody told me what had happened until Gene called at about 11 pm to give me an update after the three had returned to their homes in Indiana.

By that time in '53 I was already deeply involved in mundane<sup>16</sup> civil rights at my college, trying to integrate eating establishments in the campus area and working to get blacks admitted to the ACADEMIC honors fraternities (they were denied admission to same in the 1950s, which put paid to any serious career in their particular fields, no matter their skills, training and talent).

When six of us carpoled to the Philly WorldCon in '53, the black femfan who was turned away from the MidWestCon hotel was one of our group. We wrote ahead to the WorldCon hotel, inquiring in advance about our reception – with the full intent of saying the hell with the whole thing if they pulled the same stunt. The hotel responded with an absolutely sincere “But of course not. All are welcome. This is the city of brotherly love.” OK. And when we pulled in, a huge banner for another convention was strung across the lobby – WELCOME URBAN LEAGUE. And a rainbow colored mingling of spirits was had by all. Chalk one up for the true American way (Coulson oral interview, 13 November 2011).

Coulson said that she had been just as outraged at the treatment their friend Bev Clark had received at the hands of the management of the MidWestCon hotel, and reported that Buck had written a letter of apology to Bev's mother, saying that had he thought to inquire in advance about this, the problem never would have happened. After having attended the WorldCon in Philadelphia, Bev wanted to come with the group of friends to attend the MidWestCon in '54,

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<sup>16</sup> In fan culture, mundane refers to the wider society outside of the subculture of fandom.

which was at a different hotel. Coulson said that when they wrote ahead to the chairman of that year's convention about whether Bev would be welcomed, they received a rather stiff reply; "No, don't bring a person of color to this hotel. We'll get in trouble with the hotel." Coulson said she didn't know whether it was actually the hotel making this decision, or if the convention chairman was exhibiting his own personal bias. Nevertheless, the Coulsons decided that since their friend was not welcome they would not attend the convention either (paraphrased from Coulson oral interview, 13 November 2011).

Coulson also related a story about a fan's response to a controversial Ray Bradbury story that Ray Palmer published in *Other Worlds* magazine:

But he published the original publication of "Way in the Middle of the Air" by Ray Bradbury, which was left out of some of the early editions of *The Martian Chronicles*. It's a story where Southern blacks decide they've had enough and build a rocket ship to go to Mars. And after they've left, basically the corrupt sheriff and so forth stand around "what are we going to do, they've all left" you know. And no other major publisher would publish it at the time, for whatever reasons. And Ray [Palmer] published it, and he had a letter column. We had this particular fan, who has since been basically ostracized by other fans, saying "I am not reading science fiction to read no nigger stuff" (Coulson interview, 13 November 2011).

The behaviors of both the hotel staff at the MidWestCon facilities at that time and the reaction of the since-ostracized fan in the letters column of one of the pulp magazines were likely repeated in other areas of the country and in other magazines. As MidWestCon has historically been held in the Cincinnati area, where Jim Crow sentiments may have held sway more heavily than in a city like Philadelphia, the hotel staff reaction was likely an example of a much more

common attitude that had nothing to do with science fiction fans at all. Even as recently as 2011, a Cincinnati landlord lost an appeal over a case of putting a Whites Only sign on a swimming pool attached to rental property (Welsh-Higgins, “Landlord loses ‘white only’ case” *Columbus Dispatch*, B5, 13 January 2012). Still, these stories illustrate a couple of reasons black fans may have hesitated to participate in the culture. If the hotel where a convention was to be held was in an area known for discrimination, it wouldn’t take much for the word to get out. Also, letters like the one Coulson relates could send a clear message to black readers that this literature is intended for whites only.

In contrast to this climate of Jim Crow attitudes from hotel staff and racist comments in letters to the pulp magazines were the actions of Coulson and many other white fans, such as refusing to attend a convention where their black friends were not welcome and shunning fans like the author of the racist remarks about the Bradbury story. Such actions show that they understand the implications of racial discrimination and are willing to work to stop it. Coulson mentioned that other fans, and author Harlan Ellison, were upset by the actions of the hotel staff at that MidWestCon. Despite such roadblocks, some black fans have found their way into fandom. Most of my interviewees have mentioned that they have seen an increase in black attendance at conventions in recent years. One of the questions I put to my informants is why more black readers and viewers of science fiction do not attend conventions.

#### In Their Own Words: Why Black Fans Don’t Attend Conventions

Responses to the question of why other blacks who enjoy science fiction literature, films or television choose not to participate in conventions were quite varied. Echoing Steven Barnes’ responses discussed in Chapter II, one of my respondents and another author mentioned the idea of being able to relate to and identify with characters, and having few choices of characters to identify

with in science fiction is another reason black readers may not participate in fandom. In the following quote a black female fan discusses the identification issue:

I think for African-Americans, there is an extra level of escapism that we have to participate in when looking at science fiction. We are not common in science fiction, so we tend to gravitate towards characters that represent qualities we feel we can relate to. It's much like when I was a child and would pick the female characters from G. I. Joe as my favorites, one goes out looking for characters that have the qualities with which one can identify. However, I at least have become inured to the process because I know I'm not going to find an African-American female lead in my science fiction, so I look for what I can hold onto and go from there"(Clopton email interview, 10 June 2011).

As Barnes related identifying with white male characters in the movies and adventure literature even before reading science fiction, Clopton does the same with female characters, presumably white, as a child. Here, gender is a point of identification that holds meaning for the reader or viewer. In Clopton's case when no black female character was available, she was able to identify more with a white female character than a black male character.

Charles R. Saunders mentions a few possibilities in his article "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction," which was a response to Ted Sturgeon, quoted in an interview in *Marvel Comics' Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction*<sup>17</sup>. Saunders reports that Sturgeon said that a concern with reality kept blacks from wanting escapism, and that dance was their form of escape, and wrote his essay as a rebuttal. Saunders wrote:

The reason most blacks still don't read science fiction is not that they'd rather dance than read, as Sturgeon's informant suggests. It is unfortunate that so many blacks feel secure in acting out stereotypes imposed by others. Sturgeon's informant should have told him the

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<sup>17</sup> The year of this publication was not indicated.

truth: (a) most ghetto schools are so atrocious that many of their graduates emerge functionally illiterate. They can't read the newspaper comic strips, let alone *Dune*; (b) most non-fans' initial contact with the genre occurs through movies and television rather than books. With the exception of the current *Battlestar Galactica* and the old *Star Trek*, the science fiction in the film media tends to be predominantly white; and (c) blacks who share the common demographic characteristic of white science fiction readers (i.e. young, educated, middle class), tend to be more interested in political and sociological works along with the fiction of black writers like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. To them, science fiction and fantasy may well seem irrelevant to their main concerns (Henighan 167).

These last two quotes speak more to the initial interest in science fiction as literature rather than the further step into participation in the community. However an interest in the genre is essential in order to take the next step into participation in fan culture. We see from these two quotes that fewer blacks may initially get interested in the genre for the reasons listed, but of those who do become interested enough to participate in conventions, why do they think other black people who enjoy the genre make the choice not to join? Echoing Don McCoy's statement that science fiction conventions don't market themselves to the black community, Christina Johnson, who attended her first convention at her husband's insistence and eventually became committee chairman for MilleniCon, gave one possible answer:

"It's because they just don't know [about conventions] so they're kind of confused until they experience it, because you have the label like it's just trekkies running around in costume, and they just don't understand that there are different kinds of conventions. It's not just *Star Trek*, you know." She went on to say that MilleniCon is more literature-based

than MarCon, which also has a media track and guests each year (Johnson oral interview, 28 May 2011).

Diane McFarland responded to this question with a discussion of the economics of attending a convention, and considering that many surveys of income in the United States, such as that included on the Left Business Observer website (<http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Race-and-money.html>), show that blacks earn less on average than whites, this argument carries some weight:

It costs money to go to conventions. I've noticed with the downturn of the economy that the number of attendees has dropped too. As the attendance goes down so does the number of ethnic groups that make up the total number of attendees. In my own case, my husband and I have cut down to two cons a year and haven't been to a WorldCon for years. Right now and for the near future, we just can't afford to do more and that's with both of us working "good" jobs (McFarland email interview, 2 June 2011).

Again echoing a theme from Chapter II, Julie Washington refers to the "Soul Patrol"— her term for the system of peer pressure that works against blacks doing anything deemed "white" -- and its influence on keeping blacks away from science fiction fandom:

I bet that a lot of black fans have stories about how we have been told – overtly or covertly – that we were "not black" because we read SF. We've all put up with a lot of scorn and put-downs. When I was dating, I used to hide my SF involvement from dates because I was sure they would think I was "weird." For a long time in my 20s, I felt guilty about being into a "white hobby" (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

Diane McFarland agrees with this idea as well, saying that some of the reason is "cultural influence – both external and internal to the black community. SF & F fandom is seen as 'White

and Nerdy' (see the Weird AI video of the same title) by ALL ethnic groups" (McFarland email interview, 2 June 2011). Some opinions of science fiction fans go beyond the nerd stereotype, as is illustrated by Chris Barkley's comment that it is "like my Mother says: 'are you still hanging out with those crazy people?'" (Barkley oral interview, 27 August 2011).

Another facet of this anti-nerd sentiment referencing appearance and fashion comes from Julie Washington regarding the panel discussion "Why Aren't More Blacks at Cons?" held at LACon IV, the 2006 WorldCon in Los Angeles:

Several of the black women who were speaking (and it was mostly women speaking) said they had gone to a club meeting or con as teenagers, and seen a bunch of badly dressed, nerdy white boys. The women were offended and appalled by the boys' unfashionable dress (not costumes, just not fashionable/geeky), and decided they couldn't associate with such people. Fascinating! I think the black value of "I must always look fashionable; I must only hang out with cool people or others will think I'm uncool" works to keep people out of SF fandom, since those values are polar opposites from fannish values.

The other thing I took away from the women's comments is that they had the power to choose their friends – when they rejected the SF club, they had other friends to go back to. Not all of us have that choice. Those of us who have no or few friends can't be so picky. I have always had just a few friends; I've never had the luxury of being choosy. I like offbeat people who are often shunned by the cool kids (Washington email interview, 15 May 2011).

One interesting thing here is that the women referenced at the WorldCon panel obviously overcame their nerd aversion well enough to attend a major convention. An interesting line of inquiry, perhaps for a future essay, would be to somehow seek out black science fiction readers

and those who watch the media science fiction offerings but do not participate in organized fan activity such as clubs or conventions to find out why they choose not to do so. Gathering subjects could be difficult. One could envision lurking in a bookstore or in the lobby of a movie theater, clipboard in hand, to find subjects for such an inquiry. No doubt it would take some time to get a sufficient sample size.

However, regarding the black fans of science fiction in any form who are interested enough in the genre to find conventions and the company of other fans, the road has at times been difficult. Early fandom was at times racist, and factors such as Jim Crow practices at hotels and restaurants had an impact on black fans associating with their white friends, as Juanita Coulson's narrative illustrates. The in-community social sanctions of the "Soul Patrol" that Julie Washington mentions against associating with whites also has played a part, as has the anti-nerd/pro-cool sentiments expressed by the participants in the panel at the 2006 WorldCon discussed earlier. Economic factors and education may also play a role, as well as other factors my study has not yet uncovered.

Regardless of the reasons behind a difference in rates of participation in fandom between whites and blacks, what are the cultural and societal implications of this difference? The importance of including all who read science fiction literature or watch the television programs or movies cannot be overstated. Fan reaction steers the content of the genre in terms of book sales, ticket proceeds and votes for awards. Also, conventions are for the most part non-profit ventures whose organizers are sometimes financially responsible if the convention fails to bring in enough attendance to cover expenses. Given that the genre can only be stronger if all voices and tastes are heard from, and that conventions can only continue to function if a sufficient number of fans pay to attend them, reaching out to a group thus far underrepresented seems like a really good idea.

The question is how can this best be accomplished? My conclusion will take up ways to reach this goal.

## CONCLUSION

Working on this project over the last three years has given me many opportunities for personal intellectual growth and allowed me to get to know several people whose narratives provide a different picture of the science fiction fan community than the one I started the project with. At the beginning, I had vague theories as to why there was a discrepancy in participation in science fiction conventions between black and white fans. Although my research and my graduate school curriculum gave me better tools to focus my research topic and gather the data needed to form a conclusion, the real answer to my question remains elusive and at best fragmented.

In looking at the history of science fiction fan culture, in particular the incidents reported by Juanita Coulson (discussed in Chapter IV) and the impetus for the Carl Branson hoax (discussed in Chapter I), there were racist incidents in early fandom. One item that did not come to my attention until very recently was how much impact the science fiction publishing industry had on the entire science fiction community, particularly during the genre's golden age under the leadership of John W, Campbell, Jr. In his *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender III writes:

Even though theorists and scholars credit Campbell with single-handedly shaping science fiction in its golden years by editing *Astounding*, the most influential pulp magazine of the 1940s and 1950s, his legacy as a writer and as an influential editor has been tarnished by the obvious racism in his social philosophy. . . . Campbell's often inflammatory editorials sometimes berated the intelligence of other races, particularly blacks, and proved his inflexibility as a person capable of changing with the social currents of mid-twentieth-century America (Lavender 133-4).

Lavender goes on to say that Campbell was against school desegregation and supported former Alabama governor George Wallace's presidential campaign (134). This information, coupled with the experience Samuel R. Delany related, as well as the racist letter in response to Ray Bradbury's "June 2003: Way in the Middle of the Air" short story, discussed by Juanita Coulson in Chapter Four, paint a picture of early science fiction publishing and fan culture that is extremely racist.

However, in the course of my research, I may have found the turning point in science fiction and fan culture. The early civil rights movement, as demonstrated by Juanita Coulson's narrative involving several fans in the early 1950s, was perhaps the earliest evidence of a shift in attitudes. The Carl Brandon hoax later that decade brought wider attention to the issue of race in science fiction and fan culture, and that attention continues to this day. But by many accounts, including those from my informants, the combination of the civil rights movement gaining momentum during the 1950s and continuing into the 1960s, coupled with the image of an egalitarian future in the original *Star Trek* television series, paved the way for a more inclusive science fiction community.

Another very important factor here is that Samuel Delany succeeded as a science fiction author, gaining not only the favor of the fan community as a Hugo winner but critical acclaim in the academy, despite the climate created by John W. Campbell Jr. and others like him. His place as a pioneer in the genre and an example to writers such as Octavia Butler and Steven Barnes cannot be overstated.

Also during the course of my research, I have started to notice an increasing number of African-American fans at conventions. At the most recent convention I attended, DeCONPression, a small convention in Columbus, Ohio in January 2012, I noticed five or six black fans among a

total attendance of 167. I find this trend to be encouraging. A more egalitarian future for the science fiction community depends on a more diverse fan base. Also, another organization celebrating blacks and science fiction was launched on the internet in early 2008 – The Black Science Fiction Society. At the time of this writing, there were over 2,400 members of this organization. The website is set up somewhat like facebook or other social network sites, and member profiles include such information as favorite books, authors, movies and games as well as other categories. This is an exciting and encouraging trend.

A possible future use of my preliminary research would be to conduct a wider range of interviews including both black fans that attend science fiction conventions and those who do not. Possible venues for collecting additional interviews include the upcoming WorldCon in Chicago in the fall of 2012 and DragonCon in Atlanta, which also occurs annually in late summer or early fall. Other large regional conventions such as BaltiCon, WesterCon and DeepSouthCon would be good prospects to make sure fans from different parts of the country are represented in the study.

Two of the largest conventions in the United States are DragonCon, mentioned above, and Comic-Con International, held annually in July in San Diego. While these two conventions are much larger than the average WorldCon, they are also much more commercial and mainstream than many of the other conventions discussed in this work. As the name implies, Comic-Con International began as the comic book industry's answer to science fiction conventions, but has grown to include science fiction film and television. At the time of this writing, some four months before this year's Comic-Con International, membership badges are already sold out. This fact alone, especially considering the current state of the economy and the \$150 price for the four-day event, indicates the power and popularity of this genre.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.comic-con.org/ci/ci\\_reg.php](http://www.comic-con.org/ci/ci_reg.php)

In this further inquiry into this research topic, questions to include that I did not use previously would be the racial makeup of the schools the interviewees attended, and the racial makeup of their closest friends. One of my interview subjects, Dr. Celeste Frazier, suggested this as a possible question for any future work on this subject: “These questions could break the entire thesis if the person happens to be mostly in white communities and shares mostly white interests. [. . .] The answers would be interesting to see” (Frazier email interview, 2 June 2011). I agree that this sort of information could be valuable, especially in light of the peer pressure within the black community that Ron Poole and Julie Washington discussed in Chapters Two and Four respectively.

The most important fact I learned in my research for this project is, as Isiah Lavender said best:

Frankly, the sf community has a sense of itself as being very open and accepting, but it is a microcosm of the larger society, and society at large is a white-dominated culture that does not really want to hear talk about race.

Science fiction is not yet the open community that it likes to think it is. Researchers in the field work so hard to say “we are different,” “we are different,” “we are different.” And this notion is simply not true because there are ways in which we are not different from the masses (Lavender 231).

Here, Lavender is getting at the fact that, despite the self-impression that science fiction fandom is a subculture that has shed some of the attitudes of the wider American culture, fans cannot escape these attitudes entirely. In *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic outline how such attitudes about race are so pervasive in society as to become a normal part of the landscape:

The first feature, ordinariness, means that racism is difficult to cure or address. Color-blind, or “formal,” conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist only on treatment that is the same across the board, can thus remedy only the most blatant forms of discrimination, such as mortgage redlining or the refusal to hire a black Ph.D. rather than a white high school dropout, that do stand out and attract our attention. The second feature, sometimes called “interest convergence” or material determinism, adds a further dimension. Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. [. . .] A third theme of critical race theory, the “social construction” thesis, holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado and Stefancic, *Kindle Locations 252-261*).

Thus, we have seen in some ways all three of these elements of critical race theory at work when we look at race and science fiction fan culture. First, the concept of ordinariness, that whites and blacks are different and have different interests and the idea that those supposed differences are normal, is perhaps one explanation of the low number of black fans. The second concept outlined above, material determinism, could explain how the institutional racism within the science fiction publishing community came to be, as a way to limit the financial benefits of the genre to whites. The third feature, that race is socially constructed, also speaks to the idea that science fiction is a genre associated with whites and not with blacks or other minorities.

Recent news items, including the Cincinnati case involving a “Whites Only” sign at an apartment complex swimming pool mentioned in Chapter IV, show us that racism is still very

much a part of the American cultural and social landscape. Such incidents are far less common now than in the past, although they still occur more often than they should. Few garner this sort of media attention, while the incident Juanita Coulson related regarding a desk clerk refusing hotel accommodation to a black female science fiction fan did not result in a lawsuit in the early 1950s. The Civil Rights movement and the federal and state law changes that this movement inspired have significantly impacted society, but that any incident like the aforementioned apartment complex case could still occur into the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows us we still have not reached the goal of a post-racial society.

But what does science fiction, or for that matter any form of popular culture, have to do with the formation of such a post-racial society? As mentioned in my introduction, I see this research falling in an area bounded by the textual study of the genre itself (literature, film and television), the cultural anthropology involved in studying the self-created subculture of science fiction fans, and the study of race relations in the United States. It is my belief that science fiction fandom, as a subculture that has built itself around an artistic form (whether that form finds expression in literature or the visual arts) that engages with what our future would be like, must include people of all races, sexualities, and classes because all of us have a stake in that future. Beyond that, any stereotyped assumption that particular areas of popular culture are restricted territory based on race or gender limits both sides of the binary in question. These stereotypes serve only to maintain an illusion of difference that will slow down our progress as a society.

In this area, science fiction, both as a genre of popular culture and as the subculture celebrating that genre, is gaining some traction. As I outlined in Chapter I, science fiction fan culture has moved from the almost exclusive purview of young white middle-class males to a subculture that includes nearly as many females as males as well as a growing number of blacks

and other minorities. This increase in black participation has not been without conflict, as the Carl Brandon hoax and other narratives, including those from Juanita Coulson, indicate. Although reports of more recent experiences from my informants do not indicate such blatant racist activity as that reported from the 1950s and earlier, a black fan hearing a white fan at a convention saying something along the lines of “gee, we don’t see many black people at cons” can cause said black fan to be discouraged about participating in such a culture. Where the white fan in this case is probably just innocently commenting on what he sees, the black fan would probably interpret the statement as “you don’t belong here.”

So how do we continue the progress made in this genre and subculture and solve the problems that still exist in order to encourage black people who read or watch science fiction to experience science fiction fandom? As the convention is the “space” the fannish subculture occupies as a temporary gathering place for members of this subculture, those running science fiction conventions need to ensure that the “map” showing how to get to this “space” is available to all. One way to accomplish this is for conventions to more aggressively look for black science fiction authors to invite as guests. This will be an easier task for larger conventions that invite multiple author guests, but even smaller conventions can attempt this more often than they do now. Also, conventions that cater to fans of science fiction film and television should work harder to include black actors who have appeared in these works.

Including photographs of these guests on the convention website or in other publicity for the convention, as well as links to the guest’s website so as to engage that guest’s fanbase is also essential. In the case of a black science fiction author, readers who may never have thought of attending a convention might do so if the author is a guest at a nearby convention. Fans of a

particular actor who may even have enjoyed a performance in something other than science fiction might come out to a science fiction convention in order to get an autograph.

Once black fans find their way to the “space” of the convention, white fans who welcome the inclusion of all fans must set the example. First of all, welcome the newcomers to fandom. Talk to the black fans about what their interests are. Above all, making any statement that could be construed as unwelcoming should be avoided. Black fans able to make the commitment to attend a convention have voted with their feet and wallet, and therefore belong to the fannish subculture. From the standpoint of fans like Juanita Coulson, black fans who attend conventions have more in common with white fans than white fans have with nonfans. The shared passion for the genre is enough.

Society and culture change slowly, and the subculture of science fiction fandom is no exception. My research and interviews indicate that black participation in science fiction fan culture has increased over the history of this subculture. However, black fans do not make up the same percentage within fandom as black people do in the general American population. No one specific reason that I postulated or that my informants suggested can entirely account for this discrepancy. There may be other reasons for this difference than those listed in this work. I hope that this research project will -- rather than being seen as the same sort of insensitivity as some of the remarks of white fans who for the first time encounter black fans at a convention -- be part of the solution and help bring science fiction fandom from its egalitarian self-image into reality.

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September 19, 2011

**TO:** Rebecca Lynn Testerman  
ACS

**FROM:** Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
HSRB Administrator

**RE:** Continuing HSRB Review for Project H11T053GE7

**TITLE:** *African-American Participation in Science Fiction Conventions*

This is to inform you that your research study indicated above has received continuing Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) review and approval. This approval is effective October 6, 2011 for a period of 12 months and will expire on October 5, 2012. You may continue with the project.

Please communicate any proposed changes in your project procedures or activities involving human subjects, including consent form changes or increases in the number of participants, to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, at 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

**Comments:**

C: Dr. Esther Clinton