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Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians

Jewelle Gomez

But dreams come through stone walls, light up dark rooms, or darken light ones. [LE FANU (1871) 1977, 48]

WHEN IRISH WRITER Sheridan Le Fanu published his vampire story "Carmilla" in 1871, he could hardly have known he had created a classic lesbian tale in the genre of speculative fiction. In fact, neither the word *lesbian* nor the term *speculative fiction* was likely to have crossed his mind. As Dennis Altman discusses very articulately in his book *The Homosexualization of America*, the realization of a lesbian (or gay) group identity occurred historically only in the presence of a complex set of circumstances. The social upheaval of war, the development of technology, and the creation of municipal centers all helped to create the possibility of a lesbian or gay identity, as differentiated from individual homosexual acts. Altman suggests that such self-definition was only possible "under the particular social formations of urbanization and industrialization" (1982, 48). In his drawing room Le Fanu might have used any one of several Victorian terms for women who love women—*Sapphists* and *inverts* among them. But it is more likely he used none at all when in "decent" company or when thinking of the central relationship of "Carmilla." The story is about an isolated young girl who becomes enchanted by another girl, one who visits the first girl in her dreams and who turns out to be a vampire. The affection between the two is passionate and loyal until the vampire's destruction. "Carmilla" seamlessly weaves together the poignancy of the relationship between adolescent girls and the mythology of vampires. The obsessive nature of youthful passion seems naturally wedded to the grand passions of an immortal.

The phrase *speculative fiction* is used here to encompass the broad range of writing that includes science fiction and fantasy. Speculative fiction writers are as varied as writers in any genre: H. G. Wells, Stephen King, Anne Rice, Guy de Maupassant, Ursula Le Guin, and Edgar Allan Poe are a few. But what is essential is that all such writers speculate a

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world that makes manifest more than is currently accepted—intergalactic travel, ghosts, telekinesis, or vampires. The manifestations are extraordinary yet illuminate, finally, the ordinary emotional and intellectual questions we all ask of ourselves.

The term *speculative fiction* has come into usage more frequently in recent years by authors and critics, especially as women have written more in the fantasy genre and eschewed the space age settings and scientific jargon that had previously dominated the field (and that appealed essentially to adolescent boys). I conflate the terms *science fiction* and *fantasy fiction* under this rubric because each in its own way addresses human concern with the future, with magic, and with the preternatural. And whether used in connection with prose or poetry, the term *speculative fiction* indicates work that postulates a time and circumstance as yet unknown.

Because my own novel, *The Gilda Stories* (Gomez 1991), is a vampire fiction featuring a Black character, I have actively sought out the work of other Black lesbians working in the speculative genre. The results have not been very fruitful. The creators and consumers of speculative fiction have, for the most part, been white males. Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany are the only people of color writing speculative fiction currently published by commercial presses in the United States. In the 1970s and 1980s the women's liberation movement produced women writers interested in speculative fiction and the creation of feminist utopias. Many of the writers were lesbian, and their work postulated new ways for women to be in the world by using futuristic settings. Writers in the United States such as Joanna Russ and Sally Miller Gearheart, and the French writer Monique Wittig, examined how lesbians might exist in worlds made especially for women.

Since 1969 Russ has created an extensive body of literature written from the lesbian perspective. From the complexity of her novel *The Female Man* ([1975] 1987) to the wry playfulness of the short stories of *Extra (Ordinary) People* (1984), Russ has drawn an amazing variety of situations and people. There and in her essays Russ has shown the wide worlds that are open to women's imagination, speculative worlds that have begun to be explored by other lesbian writers. Yet when the lesbian authors in the speculative fiction genre are tallied, few Black lesbians—among the few Black writers generally—have made the leap into the unknown.

In one of her essays on fantasy and science fiction, Ursula Le Guin asks, "Why are Americans afraid of dragons?" That is, what is it about U.S. culture that devalues speculative fiction writing? Le Guin suggests that this disdain is rooted in the country's historical Puritanism and work ethic (Le Guin 1989). While these variables might merit consideration,

what rings most true for me is Le Guin's assertion that speculative fiction is thought of as "fun" rather than as serious writing worthy of critical discussion. And many of us who think of ourselves as literate or well-read in the classical sense do not think we have enough time for "fun" reading the way the general population does. One could argue, as does Le Guin, that even Tolstoy's *War and Peace* fits into this category of fun. It is the idea that speculative fiction is somehow an indulgence or that it is trivial that seems the most probable reason for its dismissal by literary critics as well as its lack of appeal to most Black readers or authors.

As with many groups that have experienced discrimination, Black people and lesbians have frequently regarded writing as utilitarian more than as entertainment. The Black arts movement of the 1960s grew directly out of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement and developed the careers of writers such as Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka. During that period poetry was a natural rallying tool for political actions; some of the poets of that era remain known as much for the politics of their work as for their craft. Poetry and fiction served as a way to redefine our Blackness as a positive force. This self-affirming approach was in contrast to that of the writers of the 1920s and 1930s, especially Black women, whose fiction seemed to be designed as an apologia for Blackness. Literary critic Barbara Christian discusses the use of fiction as an apologia in her examination of the 1892 novel *Iola LeRoy* (1985, 165–70). Written by Frances Harper in the popular romance novel style, *Iola LeRoy* was long considered by literary historians to be the first Black novel ever to have been published (Harper [1892] 1988). This early book presages the path writers such as Jesse Redmon Fauset and Nella Larson followed during the Harlem Renaissance.

According to Christian, Harper "conceives of the ideal black woman as a middle-class Sunday School teaching octaroon, and romantically insists on the fulfillment of the American Dream for black people, if only they'd become as moral and thrifty as whites" (Christian 1985, 167). This pristine image was used by other Black writers—Larson in her novels *Quicksand* ([1928] 1986) and *Passing* ([1929] 1986), and Fauset in *The Chinaberry Tree* ([1931] 1969)—as a deliberate response to the negative stereotypes of Black people that had taken hold in U.S. culture, as well as to the growing tide of violence against Black Americans in the decades following the end of slavery and Reconstruction.

Writers not enthusiastic about maintaining the completely noble (or serious) image of Black life (such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker, who have acknowledged physical and sexual abuse within the Black community or have selected working-class or poor people as central to their narrative) historically have been met with a great deal of anger and rejection from vocal parts of the Black commu-

nity, from writers, and from readers. The need by some writers and readers for Black literature to serve a higher purpose—that is, to address racism directly—sometimes leads Black writers to ignore, to some extent, other issues such as gender or class that may interact with race. African-American literary critics have attacked writers such as Hurston, Shange, and Walker for choosing to look not just at how Black people view the world but specifically at how Black women view the world. The single-issue view (emphasizing racism) of the struggle for liberation in the Black community as well as the utilitarian approach to our literature seems to lead our writers away from the African traditions of spiritualism and magic that might naturally lead Black writers into speculative or even surrealist forms.

Black lesbians, feeling triply targeted as Black, female, and lesbian (each of which also is affected by class), have perspectives that may compete with one another for literary and political focus. In such a conflicted dynamic it is unsurprising that Black lesbians have not easily turned to the aspect of writing that is sometimes seen more as “fun” than as serious.

But I know of three instances of Black lesbian writers using speculative fiction that emanates from a woman’s perspective. Cheryl Clarke, Michelle Parkerson, and Barbara Burford may not necessarily place themselves as authors in the speculative fiction genre. And each has a larger body of work, of which the pieces discussed here are only a part. But their significance here is that they, as Black lesbians, choose to do some of their work in the speculative fiction genre. The ways in which they approach the genre reflect both the possibilities speculative fiction offers as well as an expanded vision of the possibilities that the Black cultural experience provides.

In her second collection of poetry, *Living as a Lesbian*, Clarke (1986) intersperses a sequence of four poems of which “living as a lesbian underground: a futuristic fantasy” is a part. In this short poem Clarke paints a picture of desperate escape using familiar images, including lyrics from a Bessie Smith song. The fugitive lesbian narrator is “dodging state troopers behind shades” (Clarke 1986, 73). The terrors are those precipitated by racism, sexism, and violence, internationally and locally: “Johannesburg is Jamesburg, New Jersey. / Apartheid is the board of education / in Canarsie” (75). Clarke evokes the past, yet places the action in an unthinkable future: “rapists are forced to pay child support / children of lesbians orphaned / and blacks, browns, and tans / herded into wire fences somewhere / round Tucson” (74).

The poem’s narrator is in an isolated circumstance—escape—yet her reference point is always toward a larger community. She maintains her connection with other people of color, some of whom are lesbian. In fact,

the entire poem is a series of admonitions to aid the safety of others: "don't be taken in your sleep now. / Call your assassin's name now" (74); and "Don't be no fool, now, cool. / Imperialism by any other name / is imperialism" (75). Escape is a natural motif in the writing of Black people in the United States and is echoed in a later poem of Clarke's called "living as a lesbian underground: a futuristic fantasy II" (Clarke 1989, 5-7). Again the narrator is a lesbian on the run, this time avoiding the torture of being forced into solitude with "a western classic or two, a norton anthology" (Clarke 1989, 6). The escaping revolutionary is a writer, saving words and ideas from extinction. The act of revolution becomes a litany of familiar icons—Stevie Wonder, erotica, Pushkin—and ultimately a sexual act inciting the narrator to orgasm. The admonition here is that "memory is your only redemption" (7). In this poem, as in her earlier one, Clarke insists on tying the past to the future.

These poems and the future about which they speculate are full of the horrors of war and suffering. In this way they differ from much of the lesbian speculative fiction that blossomed in the 1970s and early 1980s. But although their tone is bleak, it is not unmitigatedly so; a recurring admonition by the Black lesbian narrator in the first poem is "Leave signs of struggle. / Leave signs of triumph" (Clarke 1986, 76). This combination of bleakness and hopefulness, as well as Clarke's linkage of the history of Black Americans with that of lesbians and other women, is a full and satisfying literary use of the speculative fiction genre. The two opposing tones (bleak and hopeful) are a refusal to retreat behind a utopian narrative but also represent a willingness to spin out the consequences of historical and contemporary racism and sexism to their logical conclusion: the possibility of further repression and conflict. This too adds to the success of the work as a speculative fiction.

Michelle Parkerson, a filmmaker and poet, includes in her collection of writing a short story called "odds and ends," subtitled "a new-age amazon fable." Parkerson uses a style similar to Clarke's, incorporating familiar African American images, and like Clarke envisions a war-torn, dystopian future rather than an idyllic utopia. In Parkerson's story, the warriors Loz and Sephra make love before a precipitous battle. The story is set in 2086, and the women work with the Urban Underground fighting an armed battle against intergalactic perpetrators of race wars. Sephra's bunker is camouflaged as the Mt. Nebo storefront church; Loz reports to her Commander that she "was in the 7th Sectron . . . where Squeek's Bar-B-Q and Miss Edna's Curl Palace usta be" (Parkerson 1983, 6). Both women are serious warriors, experts in munitions and strategy. But it is only in the final moments, just before Sephra sacrifices her own life, that they discover that their hand-to-hand battle is being waged against clones, impervious to their weapons. Sephra dies passing on that information to the rest of the underground.

But the story is not simply about a battle against oppression; it is also about the love between the two women. They risk censure by spending stolen time together: "But Loz lingers in Sephra's afterglow: pussy fresh on her hazel lips. Such love keeps her dancing or killing, when all else fails" (Parkerson 1983, 6). And although they are committed to armed resistance, neither woman has relinquished her humanity. The two characters are very specifically grounded in Black culture and sensibilities, reflected in many ways: Loz wears a Zimbabwe day dress; Sephra hides the final grenade in her hennaed locks; their patterns of speech frequently approximate contemporary urban Black speech. Yet this revolutionary stance is not shown as compromised by their lesbian relationship; indeed, the femaleness of their love is shown as at the core of the struggle for freedom.

This ability to balance lesbian desire and Blackness in a futuristic setting, as Clarke and Parkerson have done, is one of the most successful manifestations of what Le Guin called fun writing. The timeless dramatic elements of war and desire are redesigned by Parkerson to signify a Black lesbian reality. This story is part of a series by Parkerson; the further installments are not yet published. But it represents a fascinating leap into the future for Black lesbian writers: a considered reevaluation of what the future might look like and what role women could play there.

That both the pieces mentioned have war as their central conceit does not alone distinguish this work from that of early white lesbian writers of speculative fiction. Conflict with men is a part of much speculative fiction written by women. But such conflict is usually represented as an invasion of an established dystopian universe such as in Joanna Russ's short story "When It Changed" or the story Alice Sheldon (writing as James Tiptree, Jr.) titled "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (Tiptree 1976). The struggle as presented by Clarke and Parkerson is constructed with more complexity, so that it includes elements of both sexism and racism. Their visions of the future incorporate the specifics of their historical experience. They also remain hopeful.

Burford is British as well as Black. Her collection of short stories *The Threshing Floor* includes two pieces that fall into the speculative fiction genre. They, too, have a struggle at their cores, but here the struggle is an internal one. Like Clarke and Parkerson, Burford draws upon the familiar (a Black adolescent's anxiety in one and a Black professional's anxiety in the other) to ground the reader. Again like Clarke and Parkerson, Burford also allows the elements of racism and sexism to be a natural part of the narrative and maintains a hopeful outlook.

In "Dreaming the Sky Down," Donna is an adolescent girl trying to survive the humiliation she suffers at the hands of white teachers who see her as inept and overweight. Magically, the girl is given the ability to float, and in her weightlessness she finds freedom nightly. She worries that

it is only the ceiling of her bedroom that keeps her from floating off into outer space. When her teacher callously keeps her after school, making her late in picking up her little brother, Donna panics and literally flies to her brother's rescue. Donna now has a sense of her own power. She can fly. The teacher's taunts mean little to her now. Later, in a subtle put-down familiar to Donna, the teacher demands to know what country Donna is from, as if no Black person could be British. Donna replies simply, "Battersea," and walks away. But into the wind she says, "Not from outer space, Miss Howe! Not from some strange foreign place, Miss Howe! Battersea, Miss Howe!" (Burford 1987, 12). In this magical adolescent transformation, Burford asserts the existence of the Black British population—which is so frequently invisible officially—as well as the child's ego. "Dreaming the Sky Down" is a fantasy, not of revenge against tormentors but of enlargement—of a magical ability that makes the child stronger, able to transcend whatever would hold her down.

In a second story, "Pinstripe Summer," Burford weaves together two distinct elements: the professional frustration of Dorothy, a Black administrator who is not appreciated on her job, and the sense of unfulfillment that dominates her personal life. Ultimately, she becomes able to accept extrasensory communication with nature as an opening to her own personal power. This story, like "Dreaming Down the Sky," uses fantasy to create a magic that allows women to reconcile their Blackness and femaleness. Under the influence of her new relationship with an enchanted glade, Dorothy is able to act on her affection for a young co-worker she had originally viewed as a threat, and she is able to envision a more powerful professional identity.

Burford, Parkerson, and Clarke have created work that follows in the tradition of "fun" literature, writing that is interested in exploring what Russ calls "extra (ordinary) people," following the title of one of her books (Russ 1984). And that is essentially what speculative fiction does: take ordinary emotional or philosophical questions and set them in unusual places or circumstances. Speculative fiction is a way of expanding our ideas of what human nature really is, allowing us to consider all aspects of ourselves; it is important that a diverse range of writers, Black lesbian writers included, participate in this expansion.

The speculative fiction genre is the product of dreams of what life might be. But as Le Fanu stated in "Carmilla," dreams can both "light up dark rooms, or darken light ones." Black lesbian writers have just begun to turn toward those dreams, embracing both the "light" and the "dark" possibilities. Clarke, Parkerson, and Burford have each taken a step into the unknown by envisioning both a place of struggle and the power that comes from such struggle. This duality may disconcert those critics (like the critics of Hurston, Shange, and Walker) accustomed to a narrower view of Black women's lives and literature.

In her book *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sara Lefanu said, "For women, [speculative fiction] can be seen as allowing the expression of wish fulfillment" (1988, 76). For Black lesbians the wishes are a lot larger and richer than most people have been able to imagine. In our speculations about the future the vision of the struggle is often quite brutal, but the vision of the triumph is equally fantastic.

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