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# FAR BEYOND THE STAR PIT

Samuel R. Delany



## GERRY CANAVAN

I am black, I have spent time in a mental hospital, and much of my adult life, for both sexual and social reasons, has been passed on society's margins. My attraction to them as subject matter for fiction, however, is not so much the desire to write autobiography, but the far more parochial desire to set matters straight where, if only one takes the evidence of the written word, all would seem confusion.

—Samuel R. Delany, *The Straits of Messina*

Written in 1965 and published in 1967, Samuel R. Delany's early novella "The Star Pit" presents for its reader an intergalactic narrative landscape in which a final, unbreakable constraint has been imposed on the ability of certain people to achieve. Humanity has expanded off Earth into a thriving network of extrasolar colonies, only to find that travel beyond the limits of the Milky Way galaxy causes insanity and death in nearly any human being who attempts it. Only a select elite have the capacity to transcend this barrier and freely travel the wider universe, in all its unimaginable and indescribable splendor; these privileged travelers are the "goldens," and they are objects of great jealousy for the average people of the galaxy, despite the dangers of their work, their generally unappealing personalities, and the callous and unfeeling demeanor that arises out of their special privilege. For the nongolden characters of "The Star Pit," the arbitrary ceiling on their achievement is confronted as a nightmare, even as an existential horror, the recognition of which permanently scars and deforms their lives. One character, Ratlit, is desperate to see the full splendor of the universe as only a golden can—but, as his friend, Vyme, sadly warns him, "You can't fight reality" (26). The highest heights are open only to a few.

In this chapter, I focus on the way the experience of race in mid-twentieth-century America is reimagined in this often-overlooked early story from Delany. I read "The Star Pit" as an allegory for life under the regime of legal and customary segregation known as white supremacy—that historically fluctuating set of codes, assumptions, and restrictions that greatly affected Delany's development as an author and critic of SF over his long and distinguished career. In "The Star Pit," as in Delany's later critical writings, we find racism—and by extension the related ideological categories of sexism, classism, heteronormativity, and ableism, also important both in this novella and in Delany's work more generally—allegorically figured as overawing symbolic landscapes that we all necessarily and permanently inhabit. These social constructs are framed by Delany as our "total surround[s]," as gravity wells that can never be transcended or escaped, not even in our most cherished dreams ("Racism" 391). And yet Delany does not leave us mired in this unhappy conclusion, either. We recover in the end a vision of hope, just not the doomed hope for liberal cosmopolitanism that has typically dominated SF visions of a "postracial" future. In Delany, raciality can never be "post-"—nor, he would explain, should we want it to be.

### **The Only Reason They'll Ever Let Us in Space Is If They Need Someone to Shine Their Shoes**

In "Far beyond the Stars" (11 Feb. 1998), a sixth-season episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Captain Benjamin Sisko finds himself experiencing an alternate life as Benny Russell, an African American science fiction writer living in New York in the 1950s. In the episode—a fan favorite directed by the actor who plays Sisko, Avery Brooks—Russell's race has been kept secret from his readers on the grounds that the predominantly white audience of *Incredible Tales* would be unwilling to accept a black writer of SF.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by a magazine illustration of a space station that suggests his now-forgotten former life as a Starfleet captain, Sisko-as-Russell begins to compose a story about Captain Sisko, which is rejected by his editor despite its obvious merit on the grounds that an African American astronaut-hero is simply "not believable." (As Russell notes, this appeal to "believability" is a truly astonishing claim from a magazine publishing fantastic stories about robots, dragons, and invaders from Mars.) "I'm sorry, Benny. I wish things were different, but they're not," the editor insists. "Wishing never changed a damn thing," Russell replies. Unexpectedly, Russell faces parallel skepticism from his African American peers, who fail to see the point of "writing stories about a bunch of

white people on the moon.”<sup>2</sup> “I’m not doing that any more. I’m writing about us,” Benny tries to explain. But his friend is unmoved: “A colored captain. The only reason they’ll ever let us in space is if they need someone to shine their shoes. . . . Today or a hundred years from now, don’t make a bit of difference— as far as they’re concerned, we’ll always be niggers.”<sup>3</sup>

In “Racism and Science Fiction,” a frequently anthologized essay written in 1998 for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, Delany notes that at least part of the “Far beyond the Stars” story actually happened to him early in his career.<sup>4</sup> Legendary editor John W. Campbell rejected Delany’s novel *Nova* (1968) for serialization in *Analog* on the grounds “that he didn’t feel his readership would be able to relate to a black main character.” Delany further notes rumors of letters between Campbell and Dean Koontz in which Campbell argues that “a technologically advanced black civilization is a social and a biological impossibility” (387).<sup>5</sup>

*Nova* depicts a world at least somewhat like the utopian world of *Star Trek*, in which racial thinking has largely ceased to matter; it similarly echoes the color-blind world of Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959), which Delany has frequently said initially helped draw him to science fiction (see, for example, *Starboard* 8–9).<sup>6</sup> But even *Nova*’s fraught sense of partial postraciality—already a bridge too far for Campbell—is something of an outlier in the Delany canon. In his most characteristic work (like “The Star Pit”), the liberal fantasy of a postracial future is simply impossible to achieve. Crucially, Delany’s lifelong exploration of the consequences of systemized racism has even extended to a startling and unexpected deconstruction of his own lauded and well-deserved place within the science fiction canon. As he writes in “Racism and Science Fiction,” with respect to his frequent pairings with other renowned black SF writers such as Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia Butler, “As long as racism functions as a system, it is still fueled from aspects of the perfectly laudable desires of interested whites to observe this thing, however dubious its reality, that exists largely by means of its having been named: African-American science fiction” (395). As Delany puts it, writing of an early experience of earning a Nebula Award and feeling the eyes of every white male writer in the room on him, “No one here will ever look at you, read a word you write, or consider you in any situation, no matter whether the roof is falling in or the money is pouring in, without saying to him- or herself (whether in an attempt to count it or to discount it), ‘Negro . . .’ The racial situation, permeable as it might sometimes seem (and it is, yes, highly permeable), is nevertheless your total surround. Don’t you ever forget it . . . ! And I never have” (390–91). In the years since his Nebula victory, society has not become “color-blind,” he elaborates in *Shorter Views*, as much as “color-deaf”;

these laws of privilege still exist, and are still very powerful, but now cannot even be spoken about (119). Benny Russell's plaintive demands for respect and equality—"I'm a human being, dammit!"—in the name of a better future become, in Delany's hands, permanently forestalled. Benny Russell, in this sense, looks something like *Star Trek's* bad conscience or its hidden truth. It is little wonder, then, that "Far beyond the Stars" ends with a suggestion that Benny may in fact be "real" and Sisko just a fantasy; in a real sense, this is precisely the case.

This diversion into the politics of allegedly color-blind, postracial space operas like *Star Trek* sets the stage for my discussion of "The Star Pit." "The Star Pit," after all, was written in the context of a dominant tradition in SF that "from the 1950s onward . . . postulated and presumed a colorblind future" for humanity (Bould 177).<sup>7</sup> As Carl Freedman has recently noted of Delany's career, "Beginning mainly in a field—space opera—where the glib and pernicious oversimplification has a long, powerful, and inglorious history, Delany has spent nearly his entire career patiently insisting that things are never as simple as we all like to believe they are" (107). In contrast to the genre's typically premature and self-congratulatory pronouncements of postracial triumph, in "The Star Pit" we find the constitutive, oversimplified values of *Star Trek*-style space opera—postraciality and liberal inclusivity, certainly, but also freedom, openness, expansion, adventure—deconstructed to their foundations precisely through the reassertion of racial difference as a limit point for this kind of fantasy. What space operas like *Star Trek* deliberately seek to forget—the actual and ongoing history of difference and oppression on Earth—"The Star Pit" insists we remember.

### Welcome to the Star Pit

"The Star Pit" depicts the future of a human race that has expanded off Earth into the many stars of the Milky Way galaxy. Earth itself, while still recognized as the origin of the human species, is now considered a somewhat primitive backwater, far from the important trade routes and with its own peculiar habits and cultural practices (21). Not only do residents of Earth still believe in biological race and practice racism (68), but they still have monogamous marriages (25) and cannot even control the weather (63)! The story's first-person narrator and protagonist, Vyme, explains that he grew up on Earth "in a city called New York" that he does not expect his audience to have ever heard of (21). In fact, he has long since abandoned the planet for a life in outer space, first as a pilot and later as a spaceship handyman.

On the surface, "The Star Pit" mimics many of the familiar tropes of Golden Age space opera, among them Isaac Asimov's Foundation series and Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, which would premiere on CBS the year after "The Star Pit" was composed—most notably the intertwined rhetorics of *expansion* and *progress*. In "The Star Pit," the human race has not only achieved incredible technological wonders as it spread across the galaxy but has also made incredible social progress. Humanity achieves gender equality<sup>8</sup> and eliminates racism while simultaneously abolishing the heteronormative family in favor of egalitarian and flexible plural marriages that (as far as the story depicts) make everyone a lot happier.<sup>9</sup>

Delany's innovation is to introduce into this otherwise utopian situation of galactic exploration a racialized class struggle, in the process deconstructing the logic that equates expansion with progress by questioning what happens when expansion is no longer possible. Despite the wonders of interstellar colonization, the barriers of the galaxy nevertheless represent a hard limit for human expansion. The galaxy, humans find, is enclosed by two cosmic phenomenon, the Psychic and Physiologic "shells." What happens at the Psychic and Physiologic Barriers is quite literally indescribable—no vocabulary exists for the quantum experience of total reality breakdown that occurs at these limits. At the Psychic Barrier, twenty thousand light years from the galactic rim, "some psychic shock" causes insanity in any intelligent being (or computer) that attempts to pass beyond; at twenty-five thousand light years, the Physiologic Barrier causes death in any living organism that attempts to go beyond as well as catastrophic malfunction in any inorganic recording device (22). Reality, it seems, is a side effect of gravity; get too far from the mass of the cluster of stars that make up the Milky Way, and the laws of physics become so unstable and unrecognizable that consciousness itself breaks down. The galaxy, then, is all there is for us; there is no way to ever get beyond.

Until, that is, everything changes during Vyme's young adulthood. Two individuals are able to breach the barriers and go beyond. They are two "psychological freaks with some incredible hormone imbalance in their systems," looking "sullen as hell" as they are presented to the galaxy by the news media as the first harbingers of the new intergalactic exploration regime (22). "Some few of us," the head of the commission assigned to study the phenomenon determines, "whose sense of reality has been shattered by infantile, childhood, or prenatal trauma, whose physiological orientation makes life in our interstellar society painful or impossible—not all, but a few of these golden . . . at which point there was static, or the gentleman coughed, 'can make the crossing and return.' The name golden, sans noun, stuck" (23). As one character, Ratlit, remarks in the narrative, the grammatical singularity of *golden*

contributes to the sense of unease that surrounds them. An adjective that has become a noun, the word *golden* requires no additional subject, frequently drops definite and indefinite articles, and uses a singular plural (25).

Less than one in thirty-four thousand people is "golden," with the "particular psychosis and endocrine setup" to survive the passage (23). But this slim minority is still enough, in a galaxy of billions, to open up a vast new sphere of exploration and trade with points outside the galaxy—capitalism, as it does, quickly inaugurates a new rush of primitive accumulation to claim and monetize the next new open frontier.<sup>10</sup> "Back then," Vyme remembers, "there was excitement, wonder, anticipation, hope, admiration in the world: admiration for the ones who could get out" (23).

When we meet Vyme, however, that "admiration" has turned sour, becoming fierce resentment. In the first pages of the story, his first plural marriage is in the process of being destroyed in his blinkered, alcoholic fury that others can achieve what he is barred from. At that time, Vyme is living near the galactic center on Sigma-Prime; the children of the group marriage of which he is a part have built a massive "ecologarium" on the sand to watch alien worms and lizards grow behind glass. The ecologarium is the central conceit of "The Star Pit," which both begins on the image and returns to it over and over: animals butting up uselessly against a glass barrier that marks the limits of their freedom, paralleling the inability of the vast majority of humans to explore beyond the limits of the galaxy and allegorizing the experience of nonwhites in a culture whose white majority insists (both ideologically and legally) on white supremacy. Traditional space opera points to a fantasy of expansion and exploration that replicates, sometimes unknowingly and other times quite deliberately, America's frontier history of white-settler colonialism. Delany challenges this fantasy from the first words of the story: "Two glass panes with dirt between and little tunnels from cell to cell: when I was a kid I had an ant colony" (13). The ecologarium is that ant colony's outsized, space opera equivalent, betokening not some wide-open new frontier but rather a horizon of limitation and constraint.

When one of the children of the colony, Antoni, opens up the access door of the ecologarium and is bit by one of the sloths, earning himself a set of puffy blue pinprick bite marks on his wrist, the offending sloth falls to the ground outside the ecologarium and quickly dies in the ultraviolet heat of Sigma-Prime. The child is deeply disturbed by the revelation that the sloths are confined to the ecologarium and asks, "Wouldn't it be nice, Da . . . if some could go outside, just a few?" (17). "I don't know about that, kid-boy," Vyme replies. "It might be pretty bad for the ones who had to stay inside. . . . I mean, after a while" (17). Life, he explains, in a striking synthesis of pseudo-Darwinist



biologism, New Age metaphysics, and the late-capitalist American ideology of the frontier, is necessarily a process of permanent growth. "You have to grow all the time. . . . Not necessarily get bigger. But inside your head you have to grow, kid-boy. For us human-type people that's what's important. And that kind of growing never stops. At least it shouldn't. You can grow, kid-boy, or you can die. That's the choice you've got, and it goes on all your life" (18).

A few nights later, a drunken Vyme, furious beyond reason after a near-miss collision in orbit with a golden returning from a mission outside the galaxy (19), projects his rage onto its most obvious symbol, its concrete manifestation: the terrarium itself. In front of the children, he viciously destroys the terrarium, killing most of the plants and animals inside, except the sloths, who vanish mysteriously and are never found.<sup>11</sup> Utterly humiliated, Vyme leaves the group, eventually winding up running a repair shop at an outpost on the edge of the galaxy, the Star Pit, where (like picking a scab, or nursing a cold sore) he repeatedly confronts his own permanent limitations through constant encounters with the goldens he serves. Even though he is now sober, life on the Star Pit is difficult for him. The repeated confrontation with the knowledge that "this was as far as you could go" does "something to the part that grows I'd once talked about with Antoni" (21). Marked by parentheses—as if the thought comes unbidden—Vyme's narration immediately turns from this melancholic self-reflection to the memory of the children's ecologarium, again figuring the misery of enforced limit: "(And I remember a black-eyed creature pressed against the plastic wall, staring across impassable sands)" (21). This same depressed finality is, of course, registered in the title of the story itself, which transforms the wide-open horizon and endless possibilities of outer space into a hyperspace truck stop—the unparalleled heights of the New Frontier into the yawning depths of a "star pit."

### White-Golden Supremacy

In the theoretical appendix to *Trouble on Triton* (1976), one of Delany's characters notes that "the landscape is always the primary hero of the SF novel, the *épistémé* is always the secondary one" (333).<sup>12</sup> The close reading of the opening pages of "The Star Pit" should already have made clear the sense in which the situation of "The Star Pit" allegorizes the *épistémé* of life under a regime of white supremacy should already be clear. The privileges afforded to the golden take the form of a natural law rather than a social one—but, then, ideology always claims that white supremacy is not a social construct but simply an immutable fact of the universe, "just the way things are." Delany's



theoretical thoughts on race as an "effect" rather than an essence are quite useful here: race is not an essential category but an impermanent social construct, a system, always in flux; it only looks to be "natural," much less "biological," from the synchronic, unhistoricized perspective of white supremacist ideology.<sup>13</sup> He makes much the same point in "Racism and Science Fiction," noting, "Racism is a system. As such, it is fueled as much by chance as by hostile intentions and equally the best Intentions as well. It is whatever systematically acclimates people, of all colors, to become comfortable with the isolation and segregation of the races, on a visual, social, or economic level—which in turn supports and is supported by socio-economic discrimination" (394). The golden are not racially marked in the traditional sense; both Vyme and the golden with whom he nearly collides are of African descent (19). But the difference dividing the golden from the bulk of humanity is both biologized—they are *just different*, at the level of the endocrine system—as well as visually indicated by the wearing of a golden belt (which nongoldens can theoretically steal to "pass" as golden, as two minor characters do). And this new racial difference carries with it a new regime of customary and legal segregation of persons of differing "colors." From the point of view of the nonmarked, non-golden masses of humanity, the golden "live by their own laws and walk their own ways" (23)—totally unencumbered, radically free subjects, not beholden to the everyday constraints of normal folk.

Delany explores here the persistence of racial thinking even after liberal progress will supposedly have transcended the fantasy of biological race. The race-class privilege afforded to the golden—access to the open, expansive frontier of tomorrow—is (as with the ideology of white supremacy more generally) tantamount to ownership of the future itself. Each of the plot threads in "The Star Pit" replays the same horror of limit that appears in Vyme's encounter with the ecogarium: the horror of being told one can go this far and no further. Whether Delany's characters self-destructively test these boundaries or resign themselves stoically to their fate, all are defined by their inability to come to terms with an arbitrary and existentially *unfair* cap on the possibilities for their lives. On the one hand, Ratlit decides to impersonate a golden and attempts to leave the galaxy despite knowing it will only kill him horribly, in the process abandoning his lover, Alegra, to a miserable death alone. On the other hand, Vyme and Sandy seem to have accepted their destiny by the end of the story.

The relationship between being golden and contemporary white privilege is made fully explicit in Delany's unexpected and explosive use of the word *nigger* near the end of the story, an effect even more shocking for today's readers than for his contemporaneous ones. For a golden to suggest that the

nongolden might have things better, Vyme suggests, is tantamount to the kind of ugly racist condescension that would only be possible on a world as primitive as Earth: "Even if you *are* crazy, don't go around telling people who are not golden how they've trapped you. That's like going to Earth and complimenting a nigger on how well he sings and dances and his great sense of rhythm. He may be able to tap seven with one hand against thirteen with the other while whistling a tone row. It still shows a remarkable naïveté about the way things are" (68). Accordingly, golden attract the same sorts of adjectives that the privileged always attract in communities of the disprivileged. When one character steals a golden's belt and passes as golden, he learns this from both directions: "And wearing that belt, I learned just how much I hated golden. Because I could suddenly see, in almost everybody who came by, how much they hated me while I had that metal belt on." Mischievously, he soon adds, "Maybe I'll steal another one." (27)

Rhetoric around golden in "The Star Pit" would not be out of place in the heated discussions about "white people" and "white privilege" that are increasingly common on Internet forums and in college classrooms today: Golden are "unsettling" (24); haughty, arrogant, "proud proud proud" (35). "There's only two types of golden," Ratlit tells Vyme, "Mean ones and stupid ones. . . . When a golden isn't being outright mean, he exhibits the sort of nonthinkingness that gets other people hurt" (38).

Simultaneously "cruel" and "free" (50), goldenness is best read as whiteness. Privilege thereby becomes revealed as a form of monstrousness—echoing Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic case notes about colonizer and colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the psyches of both golden and nongolden are utterly deformed by this power differential.<sup>14</sup> We might likewise think of Aimé Césaire, who writes in *Discourses on Colonialism* (1955) of the way that "colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awake him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism" (35).

The monstrousness of privilege is a crucial theme in early Delany—this relationship of psychic deformation caused by racial difference is closely paralleled, for example, in the relationship between the Spacers and the *felks* they abuse in Delany's well-known "Aye, and Gomorrah" (1967), published the same year as "The Star Pit" in Harlan Ellison's New Wave anthology, *Dangerous Visions* (1967) and appearing alongside it in *Driftglass*.<sup>15</sup> To be privileged when others are not—and to embrace that privilege without compunction or regret—is, in some basic sense, to be fundamentally inhuman.

What Delany accomplishes over the course of "The Star Pit," then, is a reversal of the ordinary logic of privilege and power. In keeping with

the observations of the Afrofuturist tendency in SF more generally,<sup>16</sup> white supremacy's ideological claim on the future becomes entirely deconstructed, and the subaltern, not the hegemon, is revealed as the true human subject. Benny Russell's insistence on his own humanity—"I am a human being, damnit!"—is here reversed; *he* is a human being, surely, but perhaps his racist editor is not.

### There Is No Outside

But true to form, Delany goes further still, finally deconstructing his own deconstruction. In a dialectical reversal, the golden themselves are revealed near the end of the story to be figures for racialized oppression as well. The visit of a young golden, An—who could almost be Vyme's lost son, Antoni (52), if he had not been killed in one of the galaxy's many cataclysmic wars (21)—reveals that much has changed since Vyme was young; the golden are no longer found but are *made* with brutal psychological intervention from childhood on golden-potential youth. As the young golden rants, "The psycho-technician who made sure I was properly psychotic *wasn't* a golden, brother! You *pay* us to bring back the weapons, dad. We don't fight your damn wars, *grampa!* You're the ones who take us away from our groups, say we're *too* valuable to submit to *your* laws, then deny us our heredity because we don't *breed* true, no-relative-of-mine!" (58). From this perspective, the golden are marked both by their "color" and by their mental illness/cognitive difference. (The constant assertions of golden "psychosis" never really manifest in the story proper; generally speaking, they do not behave much differently than anyone else.) Again like the Spacers of Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah," who are sexually mutilated as the price for their participation in and ownership of humanity's interplanetary future, the golden are themselves figures for the racialized hyperexploitation native to biopolitical capitalism. And perhaps we should have seen this all along—the exploitation of their shared mental illness points us toward any number of similar fictional and real-world exploitations of the deprived, the precarious, and the dispossessed. Both parties in this biopolitical circuit, in essence, believe the other has reduced them to a kind of Agambenian *bare life*—and both have a pretty good case.<sup>17</sup>

Worst of all, the golden's encounter with cosmic transcendence is itself ultimately incomplete—on the other side of the galactic barrier is simply a larger, universal barrier that even the golden are incapable of crossing. The only thing known that can cross universes is something even smaller, less agential, less human than the golden—a tiny sloth whose bite leaves puffy

blue pinprick bite marks on the skin. Yes, the same sloths Vyme seemingly murdered at the story's beginning turn out to be universe-hoppers—their leaps are powered by fear, and when they slip the bonds of our cosmos, they never come back. "Privilege" and "power" are thus in the final moment of the sloth abstracted into utter nonsense; the strongest is revealed to also be the weakest, and the weakest as also the strongest. Race fantasy, this is to say, like any power fantasy, is deeply unstable, necessarily creating the conditions for its own negation.

What Delany suggests in this unexpected final punchline to "The Star Pit" is an alternative strategy for understanding and confronting power—an understanding (straight out of Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, or even Hegel's master and slave) that disprivilege carries its own kind of authority.<sup>18</sup> This final suggestion is of race as a condition that is borne by all; no one is unmarked either by racial difference or by the limits it creates, no matter what one may fantasize about oneself. "There are certain directions in which you cannot go," Vyme says to his reader at the end of "The Star Pit," a "you" who might conceivably occupy any number of intersecting positions of race, class, sex, sexuality, ability, and so on. We might therefore restate the point: no one can go in *all* directions, not even golden. In the fact of this situation of universal limit, which is applied unevenly but applied to all, only one choice is left to the individual: "Choose one in which you can move as far as you want" (70). This choice is a call to live within the reality of race rather than focusing on the unachievable fantasy of a world without it.

This is not to say that Delany's SF is anti-utopian; far from it. As Delany himself puts it, "In most of my futures the racial situation has changed and changed for the better. As a young writer I thought it very important to keep an image of such a possibility before people" (Peplow 120). But this possibility is not the same as obliterating race, which is a hopeless act of fantasy. Delany continues, "I don't ever remember subscribing to the idea that 'being black doesn't matter.' I wanted to write about worlds where being black mattered in *different* ways from the ways it matters now" (qtd. in Govan 46; emphasis added). More directly, however, it might be better to say that Delany does not understand his work to be about the future at all; in an interview with Adam Roberts, Delany notes that both *Nova* and "The Star Pit" were "concerned with describing, in heightened form, things I saw about me at the time," with "the science fictional elements there largely to foreground some of those things with particular vividness" (107). If these are stories about the future, then, they are about the future in only one very particular sense: they argue that the future belongs to everyone, not to just one sliver of the human race. If this gesture is radical, Delany says, it is only because Europe has historically

sought to completely deny all other cultural histories as well as non-European futurities (Tatsumi 204).

Here we see the sharp contrast between Delany's work and the narrative of cosmopolitan liberal progress promoted by *Star Trek* and metafictionally critiqued by the Benny Russell episode. The Captain Sisko fantasy Russell constructs is that *someday race will not matter*; Delany's answer is that such a day—"the game in which the white-male-heterosexual position is assumed to be the particular dream outside of history in which, today, everyone could, of course, live comfortably . . . if only we'd all leap ever so lightly into it" (Tatsumi 212-13)—is quite literally inconceivable from the perspective of the present we inhabit. There is in fact nothing outside the ecogarium. The liberal fantasy of a world of unencumbered, radically unmarked, universally white subjects makes the world safe for difference only by squashing it. "Are you a specific human being," he challenges the reader of an interview in *American Literary History*, "or are you some sort of generalized abstraction without a body and of wholly homogenized catholic sympathies?" ("Situation" 294).

The specificity of difference is inescapable, particularly in a historical moment in which we have only just begun to unravel these categories. The fantasy that there might exist (even in theory) a "place to stand outside" these "hegemonic discourses" is precisely what Delany denies through his insistence on the lived reality of his characters across his fiction: "If we didn't inhabit the same discourse, we couldn't understand racist jokes when we heard them nor could we find others' use of them offensive when the contradiction with our own situation is too painful to allow us to laugh. While the part of us that we consider our 'self' may each be positioned differently within it, none of us is outside it. That is *particularly* true for those of us who are black, or disabled, or overweight, or Asian, or women, or gay, or part of whatever group we have been socially assigned to, because if we didn't know that discourse deep down in our bones, we'd be dead" (Luskin 170-71). Those who inhabit the margins know better than to imagine that a stance outside history is possible—and science fiction, he suggests, as a marginal literature, also ought to know better (McCaffery and Gregory 41-42). Indeed, this is exactly what initially struck Delany when he first read *Starship Troopers*—the sudden discovery that the hero is not some unmarked abstraction but a specific person with a specific life and a specific body that ties into a specific and inescapable set of historical structures. No matter what the political future may hold, on some far-off star pit in some unimaginably distant time, the felt and visceral history of difference in the here and now cannot be erased. Nor should we want it to be.

With considerable self-awareness, Delany has equally applied this observation to his own (pardon the pun) "authority" in his career as a writer. In

“Racism and Science Fiction,” he offered further thoughts on winning the Nebula and on his place in the literary canon more generally:

The concept of race informed everything about me, so that it could surface—and did surface—precisely at those moments of highest anxiety, a manifesting brought about precisely by the white gaze, if you will, whenever it turned, discommoded for whatever reason, in my direction. Some have asked if I perceived my entrance into science fiction as a transgression.

Certainly not at the entrance point, in any way. But it’s clear from my story, I hope (and I have told many others about that fraught evening), transgression inheres, however unarticulated, in every aspect of the black writer’s career in America. That it emerged in such a charged moment is, if anything, only to be expected in such a society as ours. How could it be otherwise? (392)

### Notes

1. “It’s not personal, Benny,” the editor says while explaining why the magazine will not run Russell’s photo, “but as far as our readers are concerned, Benny Russell is as white as they are. Let’s just leave it that way.” The editor even intimates that the publication of the story could spark a “race riot.” A female author, Kay Eaton, who writes under the pseudonym K. C. Hunter—an homage to Catherine “C. L.” Moore and the original *Star Trek*’s own Dorothy Catherine “D. C.” Fontana, whose genders were similarly obscured—is likewise told to “sleep late” the day author photos are to be taken.

2. The dialogue’s echo of the famous Gil Scott-Heron protest song, “Whitey on the Moon” (1970), is undoubtedly intentional.

3. According to the *Star Trek* Memory Alpha Wiki, a fan encyclopedia of the show, the sole use of the word “nigger” anywhere in the franchise’s fifty-year history occurs in the “Far Beyond the Stars” episode.

4. In a 2001 interview with Jayme Lynn Blaschke, however, Delany said he had never seen the episode.

5. The Asimov archive at Boston University contains heated exchanges between Campbell and Isaac Asimov on the subject of segregation that make this claim seem quite plausible. For more on this aspect of Campbell’s thought, especially his belief in a progressivist theory of history that places only certain ethnicities at the apex of human development, see Berger, especially chapter 10, “The Editor as Elitist.”

6. In particular, Delany describes a scene midway through the novel in which the hero, Johnny Rico, looks into a mirror and is revealed to have black skin. As Lavender has noted, Delany’s memory of the book’s inclusivity seems to have shifted significantly in the retelling; some of the most radically inclusive gestures he describes are not actually in *Starship Troopers* but appear to exist only in his memory of it (159).



7. Additional discussion of this shared vision of a color-blind future can be found in James; Kilgore; Lavender, "Critical." For more on "Far beyond the Stars," see Kilgore, this volume.

8. Indeed, one of the jokes of the story is the late revelation that Vyme's friend and lover, the mechanic Poloscki, is a woman (67). No gender tags are provided for the character before a final conversation near the end of the story, presumably encouraging readers to assume that an unmarked character in a masculine profession is a man. In his "Notes on 'The Star Pit'" (1998), Delany regrets that the surprise of this "gender-skewing" could not be retained in the radio play version of the novella—though a similar effect is achieved elsewhere in the piece when a letter from Sandy's plural marriage is read in the voice of a woman, only to be signed "Joseph."

9. The only comparison point provided to the stable system of communal marriage is to Vyme's own unhappy childhood on Earth; Vyme's mother "ran off with a salesman," abandoning Vyme and his four siblings and leaving them in the care of "an alcoholic aunt" (25).

10. In his "Progress vs. Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982), Fredric Jameson calls our attention to SF's failure to imagine genuine historical difference outside the cultural assumptions of capitalism, using terms that directly evoke the narrative situation of the "The Star Pit": "On the contrary, [SF's] deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future . . . to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits" (28).

11. Late in the story, we discover that this moment is a near-exact replication of a childhood tantrum; then, Vyme's worried mother would not allow her sickly child to go see the spaceships arrive in the rain, so he spitefully destroyed his ant colony, strewing sand and ants and shards of broken glass across the family's living room (62–63). Another moment in the story suggests itself as a kind of primal scene for Vyme: his memory of the harness in which his parents placed him when he was a baby (28).

12. The piece was later published in revised and expanded form as "Shadows" and then in still longer form as "Shadow and Ash."

13. See, for example, "Race and *Star Trek* with Samuel Delany and Avery Brooks."

14. The psychic effects of colonialism on the colonizer, as identified by Fanon, are often overlooked in favor of a perfectly understandable focus on the effects on the colonized subject. The case Fanon calls A-4 describes the posttraumatic stress disorder of an otherwise happy European police officer working in Algeria: "What troubled him was having difficulty sleeping at night because he kept hearing screams" (194). A-5 describes "a European police inspector [who] tortures his wife and children" (196) out of guilt for the work he does; he comes to Fanon looking for a way to "torture Algerian patriots without having a guilty conscience, without any behavioural problems, and with a total peace of mind" (198–99).

15. This passage from "Aye, and Gomorrah" would not be out of place in "The Star Pit": "You have your glorious, soaring life, and you have us.' Her face came up. She glowed. 'You spin in the sky, the world spins under you, and you step from land to land, while we . . .' She



turned her head right, left, and her black hair curled and uncurled on the shoulder of her coat. 'We have our dull, circled lives, bound in gravity, *worshipping* you!'" (117).

16. Afrofuturism denotes an approach to SF that recognizes that stories of technologically advanced aliens who kidnap, rape, and enslave human beings are not fantasies but are, rather, retellings of the actual history of contact between Europe and Africa. As Greg Tate has memorably put it, "Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine" (qtd. in Dery 208).

17. In *Homo Sacer* (1995), Giorgio Agamben describes the division between "political life" and "bare life" as the constitutive gesture of politics. Those with political life are full citizens of the polis; those who are merely bare life are exiled from participation in civic life and exist only to be exploited.

18. We might look, for example, to Du Bois's treatment of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), wherein African Americans are "gifted with second-sight" that not only allows them to see both America and themselves more clearly than their white peers but that also ennobles their spirits, "for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world" (364–65).

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