

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

So Long Been Dreaming: Post-Colonial Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Introduction

Nalo Hopkinson, co-editor

I met and became friends with Uppinder Mehan when he was still living in Toronto. A little later, he told me that he was about to have an essay published, entitled “The Domestication of Technology in Indian Science Fiction Short Stories” (in *Foundation: the International Review of Science Fiction*, No. 74, Autumn 1998). As a fiction writer, I myself was struggling with what seemed like the unholy marriage of race consciousness and science fiction sensibility, and I was hungry for any critical thought that might shed light on the topic. I got myself a copy of Uppinder’s essay, and there was light indeed. In fact, some of his ideas on the development of indigenous metaphors for technological progress influenced me strongly as I finished the novel *Midnight Robber*.

A friend and fellow science fiction writer, Zainab Amadahy, once introduced me to a friend of hers, a black scholar who had recently completed his PhD. We got to talking about my short story “Riding the Red,” which does a jazz riff on the folk tale of Little Red Riding Hood. He listened to my description of my story, then asked, “What do you think of Audre Lorde’s comment that massa’s tools will never dismantle massa’s house?”

I froze. Much of the folklore on which I draw is European. Even the form in which I write is European. Arguably, one of the most familiar memes of science fiction is that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives, and as I’ve said elsewhere, for many of us, that’s not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere. To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one’s colonization. I knew that I’d have to fight this battle at some point in my career, but I wasn’t ready. Hadn’t yet formulated my thoughts on the matter. I was still struggling to figure it all out for myself. “What do you mean?” I asked, stalling for time.

He looked at me and said (I’m paraphrasing), “We’ve been taught all our lives how superior European literature is. In our schools, it’s what we’re instructed to read, to analyze, to understand, how we’re taught to think. They

gave us those tools. I think that now, they're our tools, too."

I found I was able to breathe again. And now I had plenty to think about. When I write science fiction and fantasy from a context of blackness and Caribbeanness, using Afro-Caribbean lore, history, and language, it should logically be no different than writing it from a Western European context: take out the Cinderella folk tale, replace it with the crab-back woman folk tale; exchange the struggle of the marginalized poor with the struggle of the racialized marginalized poor.

And yet, it's very different. When I rewrote my story "Riding the Red" in Jamaican creole, all of a sudden I could no longer have a peasant grandmother living in a cottage in Britain's past in the middle of the English woods; how would a Jamaican farm woman have gotten there in the seventeenth century? Not inconceivable, but I didn't want to stop and explain the how. So I brought my Jamaican granny home. She doesn't live in a forest; we don't call them forests, and besides, how is she to feed herself in the middle of a forest? So now she lives on a small hand-hewed farm with the tropical bush not too far outside her front door. Little Red Riding Hood doesn't want to attend soigné Cinderellaesque balls; come Saturday evening, she want feh go a-dance hall. And the scourge of the little girl and her granny can't be a wolf; no such thing in Jamaica. Instead, he becomes that boogie man from Caribbean folklore, Brer Tiger. These are changes that should be superficial, but that end up giving the story a completely different feel. Even the title had to change from "Riding the Red" to "Red Rider," a creole phrase that evoked Caribbean music and sexual innuendo. In my hands, massa's tools don't dismantle massa's house – and in fact, I don't want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations – they build me a house of my own.

So, a little while ago, Uppinder approached me about co-editing an anthology of postcolonial science fiction short stories written exclusively by people of colour. The idea excited me. If I were to edit such an anthology on my own, I would likely have chosen to include white writers, since I feel that a dialogue about the effects of colonialism is one that white folks need to have with the rest of us, but I also understand and believe in the importance of creating defended spaces where marginalized groups of people can discuss their own marginalization. I wanted to see what would happen if we handed out massa's tools and said, "Go on; let's see what you build."

What you hold in your hand is the result; stories that take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it,

pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things.

Toronto, March 2004