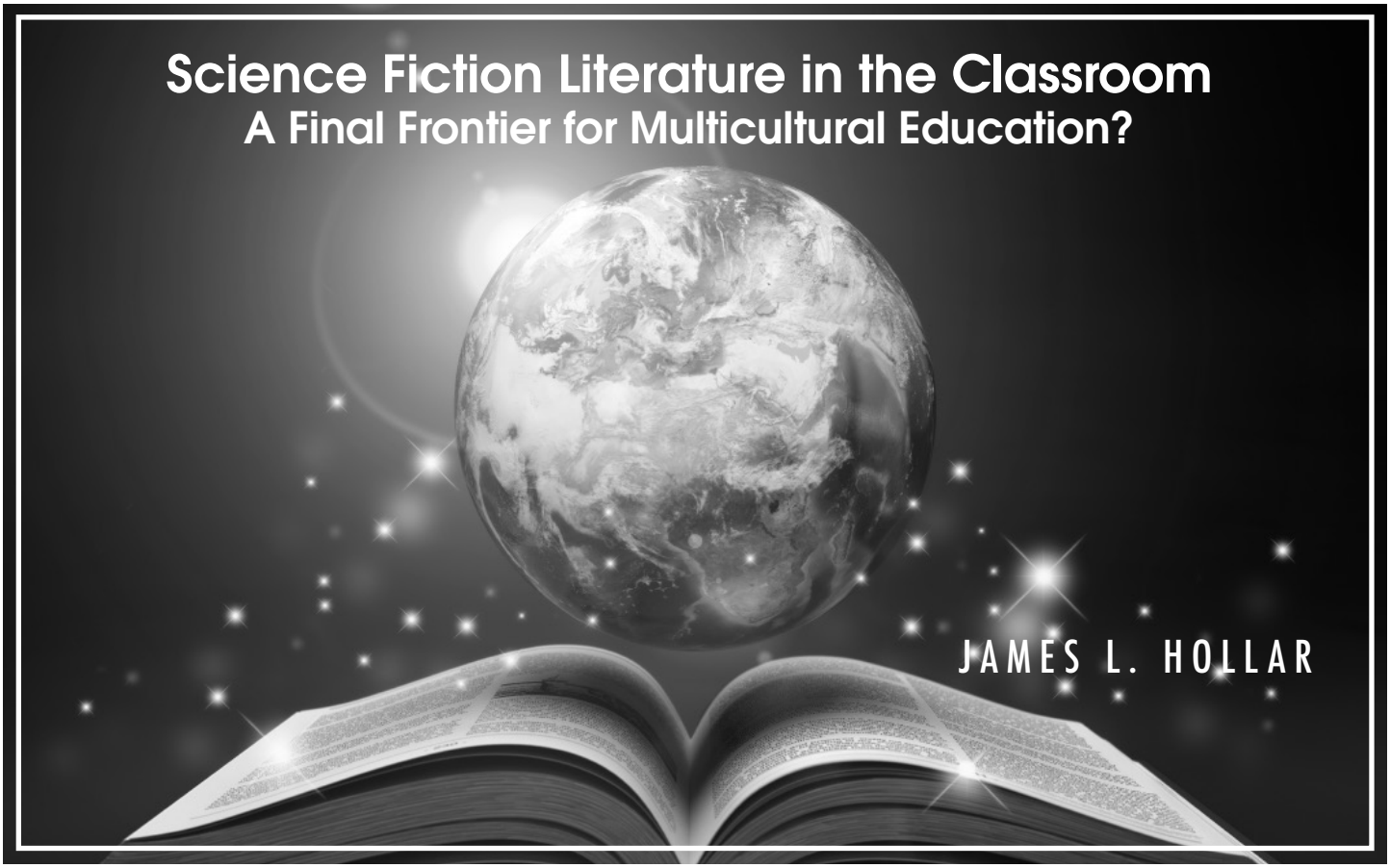
Science Fiction Literature in the Classroom
A Final Frontier for Multicultural Education?



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Introduction

> Just use the best stories, without looking at the author, pick the greatest stories of all time. Too much emphasis on selective perspective will harm the class by using possibly inferior books and materials.
>
> —Ben, student

Ben, a White male high school junior, made the preceding statement on a questionnaire in a science fiction elective classroom. I was there researching how best to integrate multicultural literature into such courses, and of all the comments made, Ben's is the one that seems to me still to be the sharpest example that diversity remains a subject far too many young people construct in overly simplistic ways.

Moreover, such thinking says that if a story is in a textbook, it has to represent the "best" of what a genre has to offer. The particular notion that an increase in multicultural material dumbs down the curriculum somehow speaks quite plainly that we have many miles yet to go in explaining the need for multicultural literature specifically, and multicultural education in general.

More than 10 years ago, Ladson-Billings (2004) observed that the term *multicultural* had "made it to Main Street" (p. 50). She clearly saw this as a negative in how "power and domination appropriate even the most marginal voices." She called for "scholars and activists to begin pushing the boundaries of multiculturalism and argue against the ways dominant ideologies are able to appropriate the multicultural discourse" (p. 52). To take the term back, Ladson-Billings argued, we must "interrupt the diversity discourse that emerged to supplant and subvert the original intentions of theorists who set out to create a pedagogy of liberation and social justice" (p. 52).

Rather than seeing my own work as exclusively an intervention to diversify content, it is Ladson-Billing's (2000) use of the term *interrupt* that appeals more directly to my particular envisioning. Simply, instead of intervening into science fiction curriculum, I seek to interrupt it, including the effort to diversify it by small degrees, with a more explicit discourse on race and racism. Thus this focus on interruption begins to take multicultural education toward a "final" frontier: the science fiction curriculum.

Entering the Space of the Problem

One might consider that an interruption of the curriculum of a science fiction high school elective course does little to ameliorate the serious issues that face students and teachers, specifically within the contemporary context of high-stakes testing and shrinking numbers of electives offered in schools. One irony here, though, is that the amount of literature used in middle school language arts classrooms that can be called "speculative" has been on the rise in the last several years.

Regardless, in consideration of the question of what difference my undertaking here can make, I would say first that the curricula of secondary school electives are an important site for reform, because they are often unhindered by district mandates and standardized assessments that strangle both teacher and student creativity. Although I must acknowledge the

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difficulty that this contemporary context in schools today represents, this opening in elective courses remains a space to take advantage of.

Once such change occurs in the small corners of our schools, the effects will have a chance to spread and become permanent. Thus my hope is that this particular kind of reform will serve as a model for other teacher-researchers who wish to make use of the curricular freedom that does still exist in our schools.

Another irony we see is that even though the science fiction elective has this freedom, it has undergone very little change over the last three decades. A quick, yet imperfect example of this stagnation is the anthology used for the specific course on which my research focuses. It was published in 1983. We must ask ourselves why a course that to a great degree deals with the future is still stuck in the past.

If we believe that one of the functions of the school is to prepare students for the future, then science fiction literature and this specific elective course take on considerable importance as being the only classroom where the future is explicitly discussed. So what does it mean when it is in these classrooms that we see very few students of color?

The answer given, although perhaps in more sanitized language, is typically a belief that students of color are not interested in the future. Thus my work here seeks to connect a stagnant curriculum to how culture-of-poverty and deficit-thinking notions still exist in schools centering on students of color. Following this, we must consider such attitudes as part of the larger construction of adolescents in our schools and how these attitudes represent larger societal fears focused on the future and people of color.

My Mission

What I recount here is my mission: a voyage into the *strange* world of the American high school, specifically into the science fiction elective classroom. This current study puts into practice what has been for me largely theoretical. My mission is one of curricular intervention to transform how students, particularly those of color, envision their own futuristic missions. Although all students can benefit from the curricular transformation I seek, my study strives to serve the too often miseducated and undereducated students of color, particularly adolescent African American and Latino/a students.

My expectation is that including this material in the secondary school curriculum will be another way multicultural education can both empower teachers with effective curricula and reach out to students of color with material in which they see their futures. Presently, students of color are often cut off from envisioning a successful future by shortsighted assessment policies and ever-narrowing curricula.

Instead, my study seeks a better way to communicate to students of color the potentiality of their future. To do this, teachers must work to transform the places where our curricula remain blind to the future not only to address matters of science and technology but also to interrupt and interrogate our "knowledge" of gender, sexuality, class, and, especially, race.

When envisioned in the standard science fiction curriculum, the future is a place of deepening class stratification, destructive technology, dwindling natural resources, and despotic governments. These are of course important concerns. However, when discussing the future within schools, we must include both explicit and implicit examinations of race and racism.

Moreover, a majority of this discussion must originate from the narratives of people of color. Too often, the future is presented from the point of view of the White male. One problem with such an envisioning is how off-putting this might seem to students of color as well as female students. This envisioning then creates another way students of color are implicitly excluded from imagining their own futures by limited curricula. The fact that this same White male future abounds within the larger culture, depicted in films and television shows, makes the exclusions within schools all the more troublesome.

Science fiction is nothing if not a place for the imagination. But what we see too often in these courses is a narrowing of the imagination based on what many deem as canonical in terms of authors and themes. What follows is an enthusiastic effort to help convince teachers that such continued lack of imaginative vision merely repeats the mistakes of exclusion we have made in countless classrooms, textbooks, and curricula. The effect of this intervention will offer teachers a reasoned and researched language to include more powerful material in their own classrooms.

We must question where this way of understanding the relationship between the present and the future comes from. How do such classifications affect students seen as outside this idealized way of thinking about the future? Does how we ask students to "think about your future" reinscribe the culture-of-poverty and deficit-thinking notions that find students of color as lacking a future orientation? To help me consider these issues, I have formed two central questions that guide my project:

> How is the future constructed in science fiction curricula and classrooms, and how does this representation exclude students of color as well as discussions surrounding race and racism?
>
> To what extent can a "multiculturalized" speculative fiction course interrogate the structuring of both the race-erased classroom and the future it constructs by enabling the agency of students of color to envision their own futures within these spaces?

To investigate these notions of how students of color are encouraged (and discouraged) to think about their future, it makes sense to direct this study to where the future is discussed the most in schools: the science fiction elective classroom. Thus my study takes place in two science fiction classes during the spring semester of 2012 at a high school I will refer to as North High, located in a medium-sized city in Wisconsin.

Critical Qualitative Research Methodology

I see my research as adhering to Cannella and Lincoln's (2009) view that *critical* means "any research that recognizes power—that seeks in its analyses to plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical 'givens'" (p. 54). This interest in the "taken-for-granted" situation reflects my initial observations within the science fiction classroom space where the collection of mostly White male students is left unquestioned by school staff and the students themselves. Moreover, if this historical given is ever questioned, the answer is one that reifies the notion that students of color aren't interested in science, technology, or the future.

My use of a critical qualitative methodology seeks to reveal how the acceptance of this situation not only masks a past and present inequality but also plans for that same inequality in the future. Thus my positioning reflects a commitment to work that

> aims to understand itself as a practice that works with people to raise a critical consciousness rather than merely describe

> a social reality. . . . It will contribute to social change directly and thus not only by informing policy decisions. (Carspecken, 2012, p. 44)

In adding this element of direct social change, I seek to challenge at a very local level

> the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label 'political' and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness." (p. 44)

Findings

To begin, I describe the relationship that exists between Mr. Rain's science fiction classrooms as a social site or system to a "social group." For my purposes, this larger group is simply North High School itself. This school–classroom relationship is indeed one of the several Carspecken (2012) mentioned as the most common for critical researchers to use.

I also discuss how I see a similar system relationship present within the larger social system. In doing so, I again take a question from Carspecken and add on to it. First, they say we must ask ourselves, "What role does the school play within an unequal society?" (p. 541). Then, exploring this concern more specifically, I ask, What role does a diverse school, but one made up of racially segregated classrooms, play in reproducing inequities in larger society once these students move out into the "real" world?

These connections between various systems and the questions that followed were a result of "returning" to my initial data collection once the semester was over. One such piece of data, the 2012–2013 racial demographics for North High School, is provided here:

> Total enrollment: 2,072
> American Indian: 0.5%
> Asian: 10.3%
> Black: 14.3%
> Hispanic: 14.4%
> Pacific Islander: 0.1%
> White: 54.8%
> Two or more races: 5.6%

Simply walking around North High School can reveal the potential positive effects of this diversity that are visible on campus, including the presence of several organizations that revolve around a sense of valuing multiple cultures and identities. Moreover, both students and faculty express a pride that such inclusiveness exists.

However, it was a reconsideration of this demographic data along with the underrepresentation of students of color I saw in science fiction classes that brought me to a "new" way to think about the relationship between classroom and school. More simply, I considered whether there was a negative aspect to the sense of satisfaction North High School students and staff expressed about the school's inclusiveness.

In the classrooms I entered, there was not only a lack of diversity but also a feeling that such exclusion was not a problem, because the school as a whole was diverse. In this sense, these classrooms become the "social site" within the larger school system that segregates students based on race.

The statements from Mr. Rain's students (especially the White students) proclaiming that this lack of diversity in the science fiction classroom was not a problem is yet another way such systems of segregation are reasoned. This system of segregation may not be one that "tracks" students in the traditional sense, but this system exists for more complex reasons than merely the "fact" that students of color "just aren't interested" in the material.

My various interventions invited what I hoped was a dialogue not between teacher and students, or knower and known, but an open and honest one between researcher and subjects. To do this, I discussed with the students my arguments for integrating more multicultural content into the science fiction classroom. Following are some questions I asked afterward in the hope of gathering this dialogical data:

> What is your overall response to this way of thinking race in this genre?
>
> What could be beneficial about it?
>
> If you don't think there could be, explain why please.

The responses from the students to diversifying science fiction material and increasing the focus on race in the genre fell into three general categories: positive, negative, and a mixture of the two. Of the 44 responses I collected, 22 students were positive. Here is a sampling of these responses as they appeared on the handout I collected as a class assignment:

> It could help us understand many other cultures and I think we would be able to have many different points of view and ways of how other people think about the future and so on.
>
> I believe speaking about race in this genre is potentially very beneficial. Speaking about race is any genre is beneficial.

Before discussing the 10 negative responses specifically, I show here an example of the 12 responses I categorized as reflecting a mix of positive and negative:

> It is beneficial because it relates to our present social situation so much. It is too bad that sci-fi that incorporates race need to be given its own umbrella category though.

Overall, I was enlivened not only by the thoughtfulness that went into these responses but also by the sense that the majority of the students understood the benefit to broadening both the content and the discussions of their science fiction course.

However, I knew I needed to examine these data more deeply, specifically the 10 negative responses. So here, instead of focusing on what the African American and Latino students wrote, I want to examine how a "minority" of the White students responded.

Once I read the 10 negative responses (all written by White students) over again, I placed each into one of three categories: first, students who felt including these diverse perspectives would lessen the "quality" of the course; second, students who believed the class would either end up leaving out a particular group or be spread out too thin; and third, students who expressed the belief that somehow the discussion of race is racist.

Here are the two responses from the first category:

> I feel that we might miss out on other works that might be more important to our understanding of science fiction.
>
> The author and their skin color is not a major concern, rather the quality and content of the work.

Next, a sample response from the second grouping:

> If race based futurisms was infused into a class all races would have to be included, especially somewhere as politically correct as here.

Although the preceding comments are interesting, it is on the comments from the last group of White students that I want to focus. Here are those five responses:

> When race becomes the main point of a literature class it becomes more divisive by pointing out differences that feed stereotypes.If you start focusing on race, you just divide people.
>
> I think that creating an entire genre for different races is a new way of going back to "separate but equal." I don't understand why there can't just be science fiction with

> a black character. By making it an entire separate genre for black people we are being racist. I think it is just perpetuating racism.
>
> I don't think it would help our racism problem in society. If you discuss how each race's stories are different, then we just keep thinking about racial differences.
>
> I don't like it. We really need to stop labeling things as when we do we just bring up more racism. What needs to happen is we just need to stop talking about it.
>
> Yes, it was tragic but it was in the past and if we always dwell on those things racism will just continue and things will continually be put into categories.

Although I need to be careful with how much I take from such a small sample of data, such thinking exemplifies the frustration that I had earlier assumed to be one of the effects of this intervention. One way I saw to challenge such thinking was to use the analogy of bullying. Sadly, this issue has a hypervisibility of its own in our schools these days. I told the student that to believe "talking about race creates more racism" is akin to thinking that talking about bullying creates more bullies.

Regardless, in terms of my methodology, I am even more convinced that including these worksheet responses as dialogical data makes sense, as I do not believe that these five students would have made these same comments during a whole-class discussion. As for the impact of such statements on my research, the reality is that race and racism continue to be difficult topics for White people to discuss intelligently, but a step toward having these "courageous conversations" could be letting them begin in more imaginative ways.

Furthermore, these student statements are emblematic of how science fiction is allowed to remain so segregated in terms of gender and race. Stated simply, certain students are expected in such classrooms and certain "others" are not. These expectations are expressed by both teachers and students and are then reflected in classroom discussions and materials.

Such curricular exclusion subsequently trickles down to when this kind of material is used in the earlier grades, and thus the "system" begins to reinforce itself. This kind of thinking is another reason why this intervention is so important: We must find opportunities to challenge such notions in our young people. For me, the science fiction classroom, one where certain "aliens" are expected, but others are not, becomes the perfect place to counter these different forms of racialized (and gendered) exclusion.

These responses tell me that, for all the diversity that exists in North High School, race remains a subject far too many young people are completely unable to think about without making use of flawed or ignorant "ideas." For instance, the notion that an increase in multicultural material dumbs down the curriculum somehow speaks quite plainly that we have many miles yet to go in dispelling the myths surrounding multicultural education.

Such students seem to think that if a story is in a textbook, it has to represent the "best" of what a genre has to offer. As I discussed earlier, this kind of rebranding of what racism actually is identifies how much ground we have lost in our ability to define the terms of the conversations correctly. It appears that these students have somehow reshaped in their minds what segregation and exclusion are, much like with racism. For them, a classroom is not segregated as long as they are in it. For them, it is not exclusionary because the "others" are not needed anyway. Such responses have made it clear to me that the use of anonymous surveys allows for a dialogue unhindered by identification, but perhaps also becomes a license to be controversial, which then may undercut how much can be gleaned from these comments.

To think about the resistance I witnessed more critically, I want to return to the work of King (1991), specifically her notion of *dysconscious racism*. First, she defined *dysconsciousness* as "an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (p. 135). She continued to describe dysconscious racism

> as a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the *absence* of consciousness, but an *impaired* consciousness or distorted way of thinking about a race. . . . Uncritical ways of thinking about racial inequity accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs that justify the social and economic advantages Whites have as a result of subordinating diverse others. (p. 135)

By applying this "impaired" thinking to racism (and thus to other forms of exploitation as well), King's term can help facilitate a discussion about what White students may choose not to understand about the world around them and the ways that choice is made easier by a segregated curriculum and classroom as seen in the science fiction elective at North High School.

Although King's (1991) work here evolves out of her teaching experiences in higher education, I contend that this dysconsciousness works in similar ways at the secondary school level based on the comments from students. Moreover, such "uncritical" curricula and discussions de-race the future and are another way present subordination is sanctioned in our schools. This de-raced science fiction curriculum also acts as a controlling discourse; the future is constructed as a place without Du Bois's "color-line," even though the line between human and alien is a constant theme within so much of this material.

This limitation of the future through curricular silence is yet another example of how schools intentionally avoid the subject of race, which then in turn impairs students' ability to discuss race and racism with honesty and open-mindedness. What we end up producing in the next generation is a habit toward uncritical thinking around race and racism. We must aim to make such conversations more explicit within our schools in general to alleviate this inclination toward dysconscious thinking in our students.

Conclusion: Final Frontiers?

Whether we call them fatalistic, "externally centered," or present oriented, students of color are often labeled as failing their future. It is these students who are thought to stand in the way of the goal of our "race to the top," which of course means "winning the future." But just as the "winning the West" narrative hides the true nature of American history, so does the "winning the future" notion hide social, political, and educational realities regarding both our present and the future we are attempting to win. Too often we determine the state of students of color simply by noticing that they do not care about school in the ways that we expect. We believe that if you care about your future, you will care about school. Thus, if a student does not care about school, we fear for his or her future.

And when we think of that student's future, we rest easy in the knowledge that at least we tried with such exclamations as "But think about your future!" But what is really occurring here is that these students are refusing to adhere to a middle-class notion of future orientation. We engage in a kind of "White talk" or perhaps White

privilege talk that means little for students who encounter both today and tomorrow as something more complex than a matter of motivation and meritocracy.

So how can we shift away from this culture of a poor future? A good way to start is, instead of asking students to think about their future, which really means "think about what I see as your teacher," asking *ourselves* to think about *our* future. We can then imagine conversations with young people that might encourage a different (but perhaps not new) way of considering what we should demand of ourselves today and tomorrow.

Taking these concerns into the science fiction elective is the next step. Simply put, we must do a better job of structuring this curriculum so it does not continue to exclude students of color. We need to see the notion that "students of color just are not interested in this material" for what it is: a self-serving (and perhaps self-fulfilling) excuse for allowing yet another place within our schools to be racially segregated. The difference this effort can have, then, is in continuing to push against the inequities within our schools. Although not as common as calculus or Advanced Placement Literature classes, the segregation we see in the science fiction elective must not be allowed to continue.

In my research, I have witnessed an acceptance by White students, students of color, teachers, and administrators that racial exclusion in the science fiction classroom is to be expected and accepted because the content is in a sense itself exclusionary. This perpetuates the idea that science fiction is a White guy thing. But we have (I hope) come a long way in dismissing the idea that math and science courses were White male domains. We have come to understand that teaching history or English from a strictly Westernized paradigm is harmful to both White students and students of color. But why have we stopped here? Why has this progress away from the acceptance of both monocultural content and attendance lists been locked out of the science fiction classroom?

Whether it is the science fiction material in the regular English classroom or the elective as a whole, there is an acceptance of this exclusion of content and student. And even more troubling is the question why so many see this segregation as stemming from the supposed disinterest of students of color. I remain curious about when and where we accept certain kinds of segregation in schooling and whether such reasoning then travels into other areas of schooling and life.

These patterns are far too familiar to Whites believing African Americans did not really want to integrate, that they were better off over there. Such thinking continues because it serves those who benefit from segregation, not those who are harmed by it. This kind of self-serving attitude hides less hate today than it did a generation ago perhaps, but it is still exclusionary.

The reasoning for the lack of diversity is once again placed at the feet of the excluded. This is similar to the deficit thinking discussed earlier. In thinking this way, we let ourselves off the hook in terms of inclusion. It becomes "common sense" to think that this material is more interesting to White boys, and we do not really need to consider the matter any further. We ignore the quite simple idea that the Whiteness of the curriculum causes the Whiteness of the classroom.

Thus, to be of any use, our work must continue to strive toward a multicultural inclusiveness. This "multiculturalized" expansion must and will continue to blend Afrofuturism with other futurisms in response to James Banks's belief that multicultural education must be constructed for every student. More than simply additive, such inclusion transforms the curriculum to encompass the world students should always be encouraged to perceive.

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