

The Creolizing Genre of SF and the Nightmare of Whiteness

in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?"

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Abstract

The alien in science fiction has not often been seen as part of an imperial colonial discourse. By examining John W. Campbell's founding golden age SF text, "Who Goes There?" (1938), this paper explores the ways in which the alien adheres to an invisible mythos of whiteness that has come to be seen through a colonizing logic as isomorphic with the human. Campbell's alien-monster comes to disseminate and invade both self and world and as such serves as an interrogation of what whites have done through colonization. It is thus part and parcel of imperial domination and discourse and appears as the very nightmare of whiteness in the form of its liminal and estranged shadow side. Part of what has made Campbell's text so influential is that it offers a new type of alien invasion in the figure of "contagion," which speaks "to the transition from colonial to postcolonial visions of modernity and its attendant catastrophes" (Rieder, 124), and which can be further examined as a race metaphor in American SF—indeed, as the white man's fear of racial mixing that has a long and dehumanizing history. Through its threat of mixture, I read the alien as a creolizing figure that both troubles and undoes the white/black, human/nonhuman binary in science fiction, which I also read as being a creolizing, i.e., hybrid and plastic, genre.

The alien in science fiction has not often been seen as part of an imperial colonial discourse. By examining John W. Campbell's founding golden age SF text, "Who Goes There?" (1938) which has been hailed as "the first story of modern science fiction," and "the prototype for SF to come" (Panshin and Panshin, 253, 309), this paper explores the ways in which the alien adheres to an invisible mythos of whiteness that has come to be seen through a colonizing logic as isomorphic with the human. Campbell's alien-monster comes to disseminate and invade both self and world and as such serves as an interrogation of what whites have done through colonization. It is thus part and parcel of imperial domination and discourse and appears as the very nightmare of whiteness in the form of its liminal and estranged shadow side. Part of what has made Campbell's text so influential is that it offers a new type of alien invasion narrative in the figure of "contagion," which speaks "to the transition from colonial to postcolonial visions of modernity and its attendant catastrophes" (Rieder, 124). Isiah Lavender III has further examined the trope of contagion

as a race metaphor in American SF, as the white man's fear of racial mixing that has a long and dehumanizing history. Through its threat of mixture, I read the alien as a creolizing figure that at once troubles and dismantles the white/black, human/nonhuman binary in science fiction, which is itself a creolizing, i.e., hybrid and plastic, genre. It should be noted, however, that this alien thread of contagion is just that, one thread. There are many types of aliens in science fiction, perhaps an infinite number of them. And yet the alien is all too often seen as the other to the self (Malmgren) and so one must interrogate who this self is and the type of "human" it stands in for. Gary Westfahl has stated that, "one can probe the nature of humanity with aliens that by contrast illustrate and comment on human nature" (Westfahl, 16) and Brian Aldiss suggests that the "essential American obsession" with the alien is linked to that of "self-identity" (Aldiss and Wingrove, 119). Seeing "humanity" through the lens of white colonialist ideology helps us to understand the type of "human nature" that the alien helps to "illustrate and comment on," which in this paper is linked to fear, hatred, and bigotry. The same goes for the notion of "self-identity" as it relates to the U.S., which is a national identity that historically has sought to safeguard a myth of purity linked to whiteness and what it means to be fully human.

Dualistic Thinking and Creolization

I start by examining the dualistic nature of the SF genre in relation to the human and whiteness. In his book *Alien Encounters: The Anatomy of Science Fiction*, Mark Rose proposes a fundamental dualism of the genre, arguing that the opposition of human versus nonhuman constitutes the very paradigm of science fiction. He writes that while "at the level of theme and motif, science fiction seems bewilderingly diverse," at a more abstract level "we can observe the way the concern with the human in relation to the nonhuman projects itself through four logically related categories: which I shall call space, time, machine, and monster" (32). While the last term is what I primarily focus on here, "the nonhuman" located "within humanity" (33), Rose reads all four types of alien encounters, the temporal, the spatial, the manmade, and the monstrous as leading to "a metamorphosis of humanity." Such a metamorphosis, then, is brought on only through alien contact and the mixture that such contact entails. And yet, as Rose notes, SF does not merely sustain the "human versus nonhuman opposition" but "simultaneously and continuously" subverts it, "generating fables that transfigure both the idea of nonhuman and the idea of the human" (49). He goes on to state that "the space that the genre inhabits is not a prison, rigid and unyielding, but a flexible and dynamic field of semantic tension. It is this condition that makes a living genre possible" (49). Rose here is attentive to the plasticity and dynamism of genre that shatters dualistic thinking—the *us vs. them* way of thinking. In *Race in American Science Fiction*, Lavender III reads Rose's human/nonhuman opposition as indicating a white/black dualism. He coins the term "blackground" in order to foreground "critical discussions of the black/white binary" (Lavender III, 6). He utilizes the binary as a way of "race-reading" science fiction in regards to the genre's "extrapolations of slavery, segregation and contagion narratives" as well as specific concepts of his own invention like "ethnoscapes and technicities" (14). Race and blackness in particular, he states, "is always in the background of this historically 'white' genre" (19) and he seeks to bring to the surface neglected issues of blackness in a seemingly monochromatic genre. While

Lavender's work provides deep insight into the racial operations of science fiction, his approach to the genre, as he himself admits, "locks" him "into the classic white/black racial binary" (19). And yet the figure of alien as I read it not only blurs the division, but collapses it. Before my analysis of Campbell's text, however, the dualistic thinking proposed by Rose and Lavender must be understood more through a philosophical and creolizing lens that, in abstracting the notion of racial and cultural mixture and applying prescriptively to various discursive fields, offers a way of thinking about the world and self that erodes the purity of the Eurocentric notion of the human and the conceptions of reason associated with it.

In contrast to the common assertion of SF as a "historically 'white' genre" as Lavender III avers, and as I note in the introduction above, I read science fiction as a creolizing form that specifically arises out of the historical processes of colonialism. In "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," the Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant asserts that "The slave trade brought to the Caribbean the determining fact of the African population. This experience of diversity, and the long-unnoticed process it spawned, I label 'creolization'" (Glissant, 82). In his seminal work, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder argues that science fiction emerges in the late 19th to early 20th century as an extension of colonialism and as such can be seen as part of what Glissant calls the "long-unnoticed process" of creolization that colonialism "spawned." The political theorist Jane Anna Gordon explains that, while "the word *creole* dates back to the 1500s to name people of mixed blood, *creolization* emerged in its descriptive mode in the nineteenth century to explain what were seen as unique and aberrational human symbolic forms borne of plantation societies primarily in the New World" (Gordon, 169). One can see how the "unique and aberrational human symbolic forms" are then transplanted as an extraterrestrial and existential threat in science fiction, the latter of which emerges within the same century as the former. Rieder's work elucidates how SF from its coalescence as a genre is always already a mixture that arises from contact with the colonized and racialized other. He argues that for early English language science fiction, colonialism is a significant historical context, and explores the ways in which early science fiction "lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses" (Rieder, 2-3), dissecting how "some of the racism endemic to colonialist discourses is woven into the texture of science fiction" (97). One such example is how outer space is treated "as an infinitely extended ocean" separating "exotically diverse continents" instead of "radically different worlds" (147). Rieder neither defines science fiction nor assigns it a specific origin or ur-text but instead focuses on the genre's "emergence" by which he means the period roughly between 1870 and the start of WWII, which was when the genre was coalescing into what eventually "came to be named science fiction" in the 1920s (15-16). It is during this coalescing period that racist colonial ideology governed by the evolutionary theory and anthropology of social Darwinism pervades early science fiction. And it is through such ideology that the colonizing project can be seen as extending the realms of humanity, that is, bringing "humanity" to the colonized, however static, closed-off and so dehumanizing this concept is within its Eurocentric framing. As Frantz Fanon informs us in *Les Damnés de la Terre*, the flipside of the colonizing project indeed is one of utter dehumanization, allotting the damned colonized to a sub- or non-human level, which is what the strand of

alien examined here is literally subjected to. Thus, Rose's assertion (32) that SF operates on a "human versus nonhuman opposition" takes on deeper signification as the operating logic of colonialism. And yet it is this binary that the creolizing genre of science fiction subverts through its own hybrid construction already indicated in its name alone as a cross-pollination of two distinct fields, science—which seeks to establish a clear division between truth and falsity—and fiction—which through its mythic lens and dynamic play of ideas calls into question such clear-cut division. The breakdown of the binary is moreover manifested in the genre's (re)production of hybrids, cyborgs, and other forms of illicit mixtures that disrupt the mythos of whiteness and purity that have been linked to the human itself.

At the core of dualistic thinking, which is an essential and inextricable part of the operations of colonialism, is the question of purity, which extends beyond racial categories to the category of the human itself. More specifically it relies on what the philosopher Michael J. Monahan has termed the "politics of purity." In his book, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason and the Politics of Purity*, he examines the "pure" categories of race and racism vis-à-vis the category of the human, calling for an epistemic openness that more appropriately mirrors the indeterminate, dynamic and ambiguous nature of the human. At the conceptual level, Monahan writes, the politics of purity "demands that every racial category have clear boundaries along with distinct and unambiguous criteria for membership. Each category must thus be *pure* in that it describes or captures all and only members of that category" (79–80) and so any instances of ambiguity that would put each category into question poses a problem that must be overcome. Monahan emphasizes that what he describes is not the *reality* of purity but its *politics* and points to how it polices the boundaries of the human as well:

While the norm for all racial categories in the abstract is one of purity, in practice, the use (and abuse) of such categories is always in the service of *white* purity . . . whiteness has functioned, and continues to function, within a politics of purity, as at once a kind of universal human norm, and as a specific embodiment of the highest manifestation of human reason and virtue. It is, in other words, a specific and exclusionary moral, material, and aesthetic norm passing itself off as the universal truth of the human. Whiteness is thus pure not only as a category but also insofar as it describes the *purest* manifestation of the human—to be purely white is to be purely human, and to be less than white is to be less than human. (84)

All forms of racial mixture, then, are held by racist cultural practices to be, as Monahan asserts, "*morally odious*, but the highest levels of censure were reserved for the so-called pollution of the white race" (84, emphasis mine). So, protecting the white race in all its purity and exclusivity is tantamount to protecting the "virtue of humanity itself" in its highest and purest form. I can think of no other place in fiction where this plays out so vividly than in the genre of SF, specifically in invasion contagion narratives where what is at stake is the protection of humanity in all its white purity. In this SF trope, the human is seen as a form of epistemic closure, which is how racism, geared as it is towards dehumanization, is achieved.

Monahan dissects how racism closes off racial categories as being static and eternal rather than in "flux" and as a "manifestation of becoming," the true nature of the human as a dynamic, evolving creature. Monahan argues that, "racial categories are ambiguous, describing what are best only ever tenuous and indistinct boundaries . . . individual agents can be of multiple categories simultaneously, yet, insofar as the categories themselves remain in flux, are never fully purely of any particular category" (136). He emphasizes the ambiguity and plurality of racial meaning in an effort to move away from the discourse of the "all-or-nothing thinking of the politics of purity" (137). Within this dualistic all-or-nothing discourse, even mixed raced people can be fixed to the category of "mixed raced" such as in the instance of the creole, which conforms perfectly within the politics of purity. You either belong to one category, including a fixed mixed one, or to none at all. For Monahan, however, not only are racial categories themselves dynamic and unstable, but so is racism itself, even if it does hold a sort of metastability: "Racism is dynamic and unstable insofar as the world cannot live up to the standards of fixity and stability it sets, but it is still itself *relatively* stable in a given time and place (or rather metastable), just as racial categories themselves, though always dynamic and in a process of constant revision, are relatively stable in a particular moment and location" (152). He further states that

Insofar as racism stands as a kind of commitment to epistemic closure, as an effort to define oneself and others essentially within a closed and fixed normative framework, when we are better understood as open-ended and dynamic, it is dehumanizing. Thus, racism stands as a kind of failure to more fully realize one's humanity by turning away from confrontation with openness and ambiguity and instead clinging vainly to *purified* notions of humanity and value. (152, emphasis in original.)

Racism, in part, turns away from "openness and ambiguity" because "instability, ambiguity, and indeterminacy are so threatening that one throws oneself into these ossified systems of value" (151). The real harm of racism, then, "lies not in its offering of content for interpretation and assignation of meaning and value, but in presenting those interpretations, meanings and values as fixed and given" (154). The alien depicted in Campbell's text, as I discuss in what follows, possesses precisely the traits of "instability, ambiguity, and indeterminacy" that pose a major threat to the white male scientists that indeed read the alien as "morally odious" since it calls into question "purified notions of humanity and value." Thus, undergirding the human(white)/nonhuman(black) binary is the very discourse of the "all-or-nothing thinking of the politics of purity," which posits one as being all human or not human at all; there is no in-between. I turn now to the text itself to examine the ways in which the SF genre allows this racist, colonial discourse of purity to unravel and turn in on itself.

Who Goes There? The Nightmare of Whiteness

Campbell's novella, "Who Goes There?" (1938), originally written under the pen name Don A. Stuart, has been adapted multiple times into film starting from *The Thing from Another World* (1951) to notably John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), and more recently as a prequel to Carpenter's version of the same name (2011). Its influence is also seen in other invasion

contagion films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and the entire *Alien* franchise (1979–2017). The story is set deep within the icy and deadly white landscape of Antarctica, where a group of scientists on an expedition discover an ancient alien beast that has been frozen for “twenty million years.” The biologist Blair makes the case that they should thaw out the alien to better examine it, but once they have, the taken-for-dead-alien-monster comes back to life and escapes. The scientists soon discover its psychic powers of telepathy and superhuman abilities to shape shift, indicating dynamism and plasticity. This being is contagious and through immediate contact can take over the protoplasm of any living creature, cow, dog, bird, even human, converting it into its own kind while still imitating the exact appearance and capabilities of the original. What its own kind *is* exactly remains a mystery; it is ambiguous at its core, but it imitates man perfectly, and its plasticity and indeterminacy poses a major threat to the group of scientific explorers and to the entire world if the “unearthly monster” makes it out of the deep and frozen wilderness and begins to proliferate itself endlessly with any species on earth. In other words, it must be contained within the very whiteness of the story’s setting. Fearing the men that have been “absorbed” by the alien, the scientists come up with a blood test to determine who is human and no longer is. The blood of the inhuman monster will hiss and flee when touched by a live wire, revealing the “absorbed” men who are then immediately put to death. In the end, the remaining scientists discover Blair, who initiated the thawing of the alien and had been isolated in a shed, transfigured into a hideous “thing” working on an anti-gravity and atomic device, presumably to take over the world. We are told he was within a half hour of completing it and taking over the world before the scientists destroy it and save the planet and humanity itself from a complete (albeit invisible) alien invasion at the eleventh hour.

The story’s geographical setting alone already speaks to an important dimension of how science fiction generally and this “modern” invasion contagion narrative specifically employs the dualistic thinking of human/racial purity, at the same time it deeply troubling it. Early in the story, when one of the scientists first discovers the “alien monster” on the white frozen tundra, we are told, “At the surface—*it was a white death*. Death of a needle-fingered cold driven before the wind, sucking heat from any warm thing. Cold—and white mist of endless, everlasting drift, the fine, fine particles of snow that obscured all things” and a short while later a reiteration: “*Cold white death . . . streamed across the ground [and] blinded him in twenty seconds. He stumbled wildly in circles*” (294, emphasis mine). What we have here is both a troubled and troubling whiteness. Death is depicted as white and cold (i.e., heartless), obscuring “all things.” It is within this setting that the white male scientists will turn on themselves and commit murder for the sake of some pure ideological construct of what it means to be human. Because it is not the cold white and deadly terrain itself that kills but the scientists themselves, it can be seen as an apt racial metaphor: whiteness here indeed “blinds” the men through the white ideology of the pure human, and further “obscures all things” including the impure alien-other that has been held deep within the whiteness of the terrain for millions of years. In other words, whiteness has carried within itself an “impurity” that it has obscured all along since its very beginning when “Antarctica was beginning to freeze” (293). And yet a close reading of the text indicates it is not the thing itself that is impure and abhorrent but rather the very act of obscuring and blinding that constitutes the corruption. As with most SF contagion

narratives and as stated above, the notion of the human operates on the all-or-nothing notion of purity. Either one is purely human or the contamination of the Other places one in the category of the inhuman, which must then be wiped from existence. But in this deconstruction of the story's white setting, one can see that the notion of "purity" holds a deeper impurity obscured within which reveals the purity of whiteness to be what it has always been: a myth. Further, the deadly whiteness of the text's setting foreshadows the human agents that through their pseudo-scientific rationale are the ones that will act in a deadly, inhuman way.

More specifically, the scientists act through what Lavender III reads as racial paranoia as can be read by their "blood" test that proves the purity of the humans, which of course invokes the "one-drop rule" ingrained in the United States' social construction of race. Such a hideously racist lens operates on the all-or-nothing mentality of racial purity and denies the creolizing praxis of the human. Lavender III has emphasized that the story cannot be divorced from the overt racism of Campbell, the story's author. Despite being an influential editor and writer "singlehandedly shaping science fiction in its golden years by editing *Astounding*, the most influential SF pulp magazine of the 1940s and 1950s," his legacy has been tarnished by his being "a racist, a bigot, a sexist, and an anti-Semite" (Gary Westfahl quoted in Lavender, 134). Lavender III further notes,

Campbell's often inflammatory editorials sometimes berated the intelligence of other races, particularly blacks, and probed his inflexibility as a person capable of changing with the social currents of mid-century America. In one column, for example, regarding the first *Brown* decision (1954), Campbell declares that men are not created equal by God, that they are separated by intelligence, that the white race has a higher allocation of intelligence and ability compared to the black race on a distribution curve... (134)

Campbell was not only in favor for "rigidly segregated schools" but also opposed the civil rights for African Americans in 1960s, going "so far as to support the infamous presidential bid of Governor George Wallace of Alabama" (134). With this background in mind, Lavender III asserts that "Campbell's greatest fear is perhaps the demise of white humanity by exposure to a single drop of black blood. Such a fear is represented by the alien shape-changer, who can pass not only for human but for an American white male." As such, the "presumed blood contamination by the thing can be and must be read as racism because the thing is decidedly not human. While the thing is an alien other, the thing must be reconfigured as the racial other if Campbell's history is taken into account" (134-5). Given that the thing's contagion does not indicate a literal death of the body but rather death to a rigid way of being, the scientists' paranoid reactions and methods of dealing with the alien are undoubtedly racist to the core, and yet the story as a whole seems to remain conscious of its own white madness. One must question here what gives the scientists the moral authority to take the life of their colleagues based on the contamination of the alien's touch. The answer seems to rely on the exteriority of the alien, or rather its initial first impression, which imprints the white male scientists with fear and hate.

Before discussing its initial exteriority, one important element needs to be emphasized from Campbell's story that differs and in fact is effaced from Carpenter's more popular film version, and this is that the alien-monster-thing is not hostile or violent in and of itself. As the hero McReady states: "It doesn't fight. I don't think it ever fights. It must be a peaceable thing, in its own—inimitable—way. It never had to, because it always gained its end—otherwise" (336). And yet, in the story its threat is so great that there is never an attempt to scientifically investigate the nature and cause of its shapeshifting abilities. The racial hysteria associated with the myth of purity prevents the scientists from welcoming the alien and learning from its technology. The rejection of its impure-because-plastic form is also at once a dismissal of any higher intelligence it might possess; instead, to go back to Lavender's assertion of Campbell's racism, the characters must prove that the "white race has a higher allocation of intelligence" than its thingified, liminal other. If the alien stands in for the opposite side of Man—the other to the self—then it is "peaceable" in direct opposition to the brutality and violence of Man. In not having to "fight" to achieve its end, unlike Man and his countless wars, not to say his genocidal impulses evident in the text, the alien shows itself as possessing a higher form of intelligence that allows for a peaceful way of living through mere bodily contact, a persuasive touch that is neither violent nor hostile. Along with its malleability, there are its powers of telepathy, which is to say its indigenous praxis that transgresses set scientific limits and that is left not only unexplored but also dismissed under the racial colonizing logic of the scientists who only value their own form of intelligence and superiority. In the end, the scientists learn to organize and work together to defeat the lone monster alien. The group of scientists can only defeat the threatening yet peaceable alien via its isolating status as an anomaly, for the alien acts singularly, in a *singular way* ("inimitable") but also *singly*. The men, on the other hand, at least those that stayed alive, work *collectively*. As the Panshins note, in opposition to the humans, "the horrific alien, even though it might be both telepathic and originally one being, was not able to join its various parts together to take concerted action. Indeed its selfishness and egoism were . . . complete" (Panshin, 456). Within the story the alien is repeatedly stated as being selfish because "every part of it is all for itself" (Campbell, 344). What makes a monster a monster is both its singularity as well as its solitariness, the totalizing of the event as something utterly singular and alone, so of course the monster acts without help. One of the lessons that Mary Shelley's classic monster text, *Frankenstein*—not coincidentally one of the ur-texts of the SF genre—so clearly imparts to us is that monsters have no friends. Monsters—and in this story this is no exception—are read as selfish for simply wanting to live, to be allowed to live freely, which paradoxically humanizes them. In Campbell's story, there is something in the alien monster itself that is human in that it can imitate Man so flawlessly, which also suggests that *it might know Man better than Man knows himself*. Its powers over matter illustrate a more advanced and pliable technology that poses a threat to Man's supremacy and his own supposedly higher intelligence. But more specifically it threatens the "closed and fixed normative framework" of the human that Monahan links to racism's commitment to epistemic closure (Monahan, 152), and as such the "open-ended and dynamic" shapeshifting alien that troubles this framework must be annihilated at all costs.

In its true essence, the form of this powerful entity is nonexistent and yet, in order to explicitly establish its monstrosity marking it as something that is, to use Monahan's term, morally odious, it is given form at the beginning of the story in its frozen state: "Three mad, hate-filled eyes blazed up with the living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood from a face ringed with a writhing, loathsome nest of worms, blue, mobile worms that crawled where hair should grow" (301–302). The initial appearance of the alien, which may or may not be its "natural form," is genuinely hideous in its Lovecraftian monstrosity (the connection here is not fortuitous as Lovecraft's racism is well established), and more importantly time and again we are told of the mad hate in its face: "If you can judge the look on its face—it isn't human so maybe you can't—it was annoyed when it froze. Annoyed, in fact, is about as close an approximation of the way it felt as crazy, mad, insane hatred" (299). Its deformed, impure, and angry exteriority helps to mark it as evil and malevolent toward the human species for both the scientists and the reader. Its three eyes mark a multiplicity that goes against the natural laws of nature. But why might it be so annoyed and angry—"Mad? It was mad clear through—searing, blistering mad!" (299)— is a question that remains unanswered and yet we can deduce a possibility through the description of its "mad, hate filled eyes" blazing up "with the living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood." Blood, as stated above, plays a central role in the story, as it is through testing blood that the purity of "human" is proven. But in this description of "fresh-spilled blood" early on, we have an indication of a possible past wrong (done shortly before the alien froze); the beast is angry because of blood spilled, presumably that of its own kind. And this primordial anger is coming back to life with "living fire." The "crawling" blue worms-for-hair also indicates death and decay being reanimated. The reader is asked, then, to speculate briefly on a possible haunting and return, but not much more. After all, this is no ghost story, but the open-ended nature of the thing's origins speaks to how the SF genre allows for a conception of time that cannot be closed off. The alien's look inspires a conversation between Blair and Connant, another scientist, regarding its "evil nature." Blair tells Connant "just because its nature is different, you haven't any right to say it's necessarily evil," to which the latter, looking at the frozen thing, responds with "Haw! It may be that things from other worlds don't *have* to be evil just because they're different. But that thing *was!* Child of Nature, eh? Well, it was a hell of an evil Nature" (306). Despite Blair's argument against the thing's evilness, the team of scientists regard it as a malevolent entity of "an evil Nature" based on its hideous and impure looks alone. Its look, informed by underlying racial paranoia, is what gives the scientists the moral authority to kill. The initial exteriority of the alien monster soon gives way to a repugnant interiority in the men, which allows them to kill one another remorselessly, all in the service of protecting all of "humanity."

By the time the scientists manage to destroy the alien in its monstrous form, it has potentially taken over the shape of any number of the sled dogs or the men themselves, and from then on, the alien entity ceases to be *a physical perversion* and becomes something more akin to *a spiritual and metaphysical corruption*. Connant, the first person to notice the missing beast, is put into question as perhaps no longer being human and soon afterward, the men start to question one other's humanity: "*Is that man next to me an inhuman monster?*" (343, emphasis in the original). The move from human to nonhuman is swift and automatic. Each man questions the other but also their own self: one man asks, "Hey, Mac.

Mac, would I know if I was a monster? Would I know if the monster had already got me? Oh lord, I may be a monster already.' 'You'd know,' McReady answered. 'But we wouldn't,' Norris laughed shortly, half-hysterically" (331). The supposed death by contagion here is called into question in the men not knowing whether or not they would know if their humanity was killed off. The alien does not produce but rather disrupts and illuminates the corruption of the human genre when seen as a static and given genre. The fact is that in the end, fifteen men out of the thirty-seven personnel are killed because of this pseudo-scientific test of human blood purity. In their hysteria to be free of the monstrous other the men become monsters themselves. Focusing on the look, Rieder reads Campbell's alien as a threat to individual identity:

Its mental broadcasts displace the self from within, and its imitation both destroys the self's uniqueness and undercuts any communal support for the embattled individuals. In this story the fundamental sign of the Other is the *look*. First in the alien's baleful glare, and later in the men's suspicious staring of one another, the look is the sign and vehicle of psychological aggression; it prefigures the savage violence against the alien which erupts at the story's resolution. Conversely, what *unites* the men and the alien is the look, for it also signals the paramount instinctual need in this story: self-preservation . . . the plot, then, can only take place on the ideological terrain of an atomistic, aggressive individualism. (Rieder 1982, 31-32)

Writing on contagion in regard of the gaze of the Other, Lavender III states that

transference of fear occurs through the gaze. Fear of illness and death is replaced by a fear of difference and change because of the potential for harm that contact with the other represents—something, perhaps, unclean. A new truth is established as fear of the other becomes contagious through the perception of visual differences. Thus, to be contagious is to be feared as other. (Lavender III, 121)

The men in the story fear the look and gaze of the alien-other, which is to say they fear that they themselves will be reflected in, and so *become* what they themselves have designated as evil and impure. Because the alien is bereft of speech, a mute thing, this becoming thus leads from an "unclean" exteriority to a *perverted* interiority through the trope of "contagion," which is to say, transference occurs by way of close proximity: *a mere look and a touch*. Further, the alien blood that tries to self-preserve when confronted by a deadly live wire mirrors the scientists that likewise self-preserve by seeking to halt the contagion, even if it means killing members of their own team, which suggests a weaving of the alien and the human rather than a clear-cut division. However, passed the beginning of the story, the alien has for all intents and purposes physically vanished and all that that remains are the men themselves. Thus, the human-nonhuman, self-other opposition collapses in on itself. All that is left in the end is the "atomistic, aggressive individualism" of the white, male scientists themselves.

I would like to return here to the story's geographical setting of Antarctica, which comments further on the scientist's all-or-nothing dualistic thinking of the human that reflects the genre's human/nonhuman binary. The alien, we are told, is discovered at the point "exactly over the South Magnetic Pole of the Earth" (Campbell, 292). The text, then, is set directly on the north/south opposition, which denotes extreme polarization, with the

south part tellingly posing as a threat to the north part, i.e., the entire planet. Through its own deadly and blinding white terrain, the text is to a degree aware of its own situated polarization. Here, the whiteness of the setting is indeed extreme, as is the binary thinking of the scientists themselves. The fact that women are completely effaced from the story (the only human agents are white males) further speaks to the text's polarizing and rigid mentality. The plasticity of the thing's materiality brings to mind the plasticity of the female body and its ability to engender racialized difference, which further suggests the thing is not only racialized but also gendered as well. Moreover, the "south magnetic pole" indicates a literal limit to scientific exploration to the self and the world. Interestingly, it is at the limits of human-cum-white understanding and knowledge of the world that the men encounter a limitless, ever expanding and ultimately indigenous entity that seemingly violates all scientific laws. One can draw from here that it is at the borders that transgressions take place both in the story and the genre of SF in general, which bring us to those very borders and limitations only to transgress established "natural laws" imposed by Man. And yet, what the white men encounter in the alien is the liminal shadow side of their own humanity. When the men first find the alien they also find a spaceship that is accidentally destroyed, but not before the men see "black bulks," and count "three other *shadow-things* that might have been—passengers—frozen there. Then the ice came down and against the ship" (296, emphasis mine).

This description captures what the aliens-as-shadow-things represent—the shadow of blackness that whiteness casts and indeed needs in order to sustain itself. Here, I am of course drawing on Toni Morrison's analysis of American literature and criticism, in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison dissects how what she terms "a fabricated Africanist presence," which is the "thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy—an informing, stabilizing, and disturbing element" is crucial to the work of major American writers (13). Speaking of this bound presence in the blinding white terrains of American fiction, she writes

Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both an antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. (33)

For Morrison, the very concept of human freedom in the formation of American literature—and indeed of the entire nation—is inevitably tied to slavery, and she goes on to observe that "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, *the projection of the not-me*. The result was a playground for the imagination" (38, emphasis mine). This "projection of the not-me," in canonical American texts takes on the shape of mystifying and terrifying alien forms as it migrates into the genre of SF, all the while continuing to be informed by the "dynamic polarity created by skin color." As disturbing and fear-laden as it appears to be, this projection serves to inform and stabilize the notion of the human, *the not-alien*, in all its "mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, [and] implacable" whiteness (Morrison, 59).

And yet the alien-shadow serves as a creolizing force that disrupts the whiteness of the human/text, calling into question set notions of the human and revealing the human/alien as in fact being two sides of the same coin, one containing the other: no extension but no separation either. In its own way, Campbell's text offers this warning: extreme polarization leads to extreme and blinding violence that is directly tied to white paranoia and the all-or-nothing myth of purity, which points to "what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters" (Morrison, 12). In the story the very idea of mixture with an alien form, no matter how powerful, is intolerable because it operates by the extreme polarization of the politics of racial purity and the logic of colonialism itself. Either one is completely free of alien blood and purely human, or the smallest amount of alien blood renders one a total "inhuman monster" that must be destroyed at all cost. There can be no sustained interaction between the two. And yet a close reading of the text flips the script and reveals the inhuman resides within the human, and vice versa, the human likewise resides in the inhuman. Through this reading, the genre of SF allows us the possibility to not only posit humanity in what we construe as fundamentally alien but also posit that dark and obscure alien element squarely within the human itself. With the unearthing of this "unearthly" alien that has been *bound* since the first arctic freezing of the planet, no matter how hard they resist it, Campbell's scientists must contend with the fact that division between self and other is no longer as clear cut as they might still wish it to be; the "contagious" alien has rendered such a border porous and ambiguous.

Creolizing the Genre(s) of Man

One can well state that the primary function of the alien in science fiction is precisely this: to render the border between self and other porous and ambiguous. But the calling into question of scientific as well as metaphysical borders is also a function of the SF genre as a whole, which can be read as being alien onto itself in its ongoing creolizing and shapeshifting composition. While white male authors historically may have taken dominance over the genre through much of the previous century, blanketing it with racist colonial ideology, the genre like the alien itself is "impure" through its hybridity and plasticity and thus subverts such ideology by turning it on its head. I believe this also helps to explain the division the U.S. academy polices in its liminal assignation of the SF genre as "popular" as opposed to "literary" fiction, not worthy of the same level of study as so-called high literature. As noted earlier, the name itself already indicates an illicit blending of science and literature, of fact and myth, which crosses multiple disciplinary lines, and as Gordon explains, the "cross-fertilization of distinctive disciplinary developments" within the academy tends to be "averted by a repugnance" that treats "the products as crude, deformed impurities" (Gordon, 4). The SF genre is treated as a "crude, deformed impurity" because of its hybridity and plasticity but also of the "crossbreeding and intermixture" of multiple disciplines that then gets read as a bastardization, and so relegated to, as James Edward puts it, the "ghetto" of the literary establishment (James, 6). A look at the genre's muddled and multiple beginnings reveals further cross-fertilization with a range of literary forms such as romance, fantasy, gothic fiction and horror, and other generic mixtures that SF continues to forge in order to evolve. It is also multimodal, capable of traveling

seamlessly from pulp magazines to novels to film, television and video games (for an examination of how the genre applies across the range of these cultural forms, see Milner, 1–22). Such crossings mark the creolizing technological praxis of the genre that puts into play multiple categories at once while never privileging one over another, meaning there is no hierarchy here, and no all-or-nothing thinking of “pure categories” (disciplinary or otherwise). Rather it calls into question dualistic ways of being in and perceiving the world. Such dynamic hybridity, moreover, creates ambiguity, which is why those who do study the genre have to deal with its contradictory definitions. Simply put, among many theories, there is no critical consensus on what science fiction actually is and the ambiguity seems to rest on its obscure origins.

Noting the disagreement and lack of critical consensus of the genre's origin has led the scholar Paul Kincaid to declare that the genre is “indefinable” in its multiplicity. He argues in his influential essay, “On the Origins of Genre,” that SF is “not one thing, but many” and because “there is not one definition of science fiction but many . . . not one urtext [origin] but many” it is simply “indefinable” (411). Because of the rhizomatic nature of its dynamic hybridity, although Kincaid does not name SF as such, “we cannot extract a unique common thread which we could trace back to a unique common origin” (413). And yet there is unity; SF still coheres due to an “identifiable pattern” that is in a “state of constant flux” and that a definition would try to “fix,” (414) but as he asserts, no definition of science fiction “has successfully managed to encompass all that it is, all that it has been, and all that it might be” (414). This again speaks to the pliability and dynamism of not only the literary genre but also the human genre, that it is constantly “in flux” and cannot be “fixed” by any one definition. Kincaid further elaborates that SF is not one but

any number of things—a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, a particular approach to the matter of story, whatever we may be looking for when we look for science fiction, here more overt, here more subtle—which are braided together in an endless variety of combinations. (417)

He sees science fiction itself as a weaving together of disparate elements—“a series of strands” which when “braided together in any of a possibly infinite number of combinations, make what we have come to recognize as science fiction” (417). In other words, science fiction is itself a dynamic mixture that further produces “endless” mixtures, creolizing everything in its path and along the way effing the law of purity and revealing itself to be contaminating as well as contaminated by the other it touches. Kincaid further asserts that “it is not in the heartland of science fiction that definitions, or family resemblances, are an issue, but on the borders, where science fiction is changing into something else, or something else is changing into science fiction” (415). Kincaid here speaks to the open boundaries of the genre itself through which the alien element can enter and provide SF what it needs to mutate and evolve. The borders here are not erased but rendered porous—it is the place of contact with the other that transforms the essence of a thing perpetually, emphasizing an essential becoming. It is such ungovernable mutability of both genre and selfhood that greatly troubles the whiteness and “humanity” of Campbell's text.

As with science fiction as Kincaid articulates it, creolization points toward what Monahan elucidates as "a *telos* without a terminus." He further elaborates:

Just as liberation cannot be understood a *state* to be achieved, so too is creolization, in this prescriptive sense, never something that we may accomplish and refer to as a *fait accompli* but only ever be a kind of norm that conditions our efforts without determining them. The call for [creolization] . . . is not directed toward some static terminus as an end state but rather points toward the characteristics of methods and practices that at once recognize and foster the fundamental *human* practices of creolization. It is an intellectual framework that foregrounds the ambiguity and hybridity that is understood not as a weakness or obstacle to our political and epistemic efforts but rather as a condition for the possibility of human existence as *freedom*. (Monahan 2017, 7)

The "*telos* without a terminus" of creolization must thus "entail the fostering of a more genuinely *human* world, where humanity is itself understood to be a hybrid, ambiguous, and dynamic process of ongoing creolization, but where each moment of creolization stands as the open possibility or even *invitation* to yet further such moments" (7). Science fiction as an explicit creolizing and "living" genre that inhabits "a flexible and dynamic field of semantic tension" (Rose, 49) and maintains open its borders as a necessary condition for its existence, allows us to envision alien worlds that help us to understand the "hybrid, ambiguous, and dynamic process of ongoing creolization" that more accurately reflects humanity itself. The genre's 'creolizing technological praxis,' as I have termed it here, allows for new ways of being and interacting with others (and otherness itself) in a cosmos that is dynamically interwoven and future-oriented. As a "non-realist" genre what I believe gives science fiction its power and strength is its ability to mirror the world *not as it is, but as it can be*. And yet, through its creolizing construction and praxis, in its own way it more accurately mirrors the reality of self and world: that we are all "braided" together constantly in "flux": always in the process of becoming something other than what we are now. But specifically, it is through the reflection of the shapeshifting alien that humanity can be viewed as a "process" that resists epistemic closure and opens itself up to the possibility of human liberation and the freedom to be other unto itself.

The common reaction to the alien in SF contagion narratives, set forth by Campbell's founding and influential novella explored here, reflects on the capacity of the darker side of human nature to annihilate and destroy different ways of being in the world. In fact, it reflects zero tolerance for difference in and of itself, since that is what the alien, in its capacity to endlessly shift shape, represents. And in the western world, difference has nowhere else been more marked than in the enslaved black body, which was, to use Morrison's term, "visible to a fault" (Morrison, 49). The fear of contagion, i.e., *dis-ease* spread by intermixture with the alien-ness of blackness in all its manifestations, is the fear of losing one's grip on "humanity," or what amounts to losing the hold on the "exclusionary moral, material, and aesthetic norm passing itself off as the universal truth of the human" (Monahan, 84). Through its dehumanizing politics of purity and colonial all-or-nothing way of thinking, such zero tolerance of other forms of humanity also speaks to the incredible appetite and greed of Man, to his greediness in wanting to keep the category of the human

all to himself and being unwilling to share the world with other "alien" beings. And whether these alien beings are of terrestrial or extraterrestrial origin, actual *Homo sapiens* or not, makes no difference. And yet, through the open borders of the SF genre, the alien persistently enters and reenters our dreams and our nightmares. As Campbell's story illustrates, the alien inevitably surfaces, offering a reflection of aspects of our humanity that have been frozen, buried, and kept in suspension by an icy cold whiteness. And while the SF narrative of contagion is one that vilifies and demonizes the alien's embodied difference, other narratives acknowledge such *alterity* as a benefactor of humanity (i.e., Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood End* [1953] and Octavia E. Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* [2000]). Such narratives posit the human not as a static and given genre, but as an open, living one capable of metamorphoses, and it is the alien difference that assists and is required for such profound transformation to occur. But this necessitates at the very least an openness to "creolizing technologies" that can lead us to alien ways of becoming human and take us to where the genre of SF is meant to take us: into the unknown.



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